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A CONVICT BY PROXY.

A Detective Story that will strike you as something out of the ordinary. Told in Three Parts, by Tinker, Sexton Blake, and the Hon. John Lawless, respectively.

Part I. TOLD BY TINKER.

CHAPTER 1.

The Man with the Convict Crop—A Lesson in Manners—Lawless Makes Friends—A Crook at Large.

I AM really no sort of fist at telling a yarn, but the gov'nor reckons it out that this case was really my affair at the start, and it is at his suggestion that I am going to write down all I know about it. Only don't expect that my yarn will work out like a bit of clockwork, for it won't! I am telling it after it all happened, and so I can fit in here and there bits that I couldn't very well have done at the time.

Anyhow, I haven't got to finish the story, so I dare say all the pieces will be picked up by the end.

It was the first week in June, and London was doing its best to be a frying-pan. I had developed an extra large-sized hump at Baker Street, for there was nothing much doing except to kill bluebottles, and even old Pedro got fed-up with that pastime. The gov'nor was away in Paris doing something for the Government, and he hadn't asked me to join him, so I felt pretty lonesome.

That was why I was ready to jump at the chance that Mr. Lawless gave me. He 'phoned up one morning and said that he was going to run down in his big Sunbeam to Seareach, on the Dorset coast, and he asked me to get my bag of golfsticks and join him. Sam, his black servant, was going with him, and he had wired for rooms at the Imperial.

He reckoned we could spend a long week-end there, and I agreed with him; so I flung a few things into a bag, grabbed my golfsticks, and did a rapid rush round to the bank to see how the credit stood, and was back again in time to meet Lawless.

His Sunbeam is just about the daisiest thing on fat rubber wheels that ever happened, and I settled down in the back seat along with Sam, and enjoyed watching Lawless skim the corners of the streets as he steered that silent beauty through London. When we were out into the open Lawless gave the wheel to old Sam, and came and sat beside me.

He had been away from England for five or six weeks, and looked rather thin. I knew that it was probably some Foreign Office job that he had been engaged on, and I didn't ask any questions. He was looking forward to the golf, and so was I.

There are some people who think that golf is an old man's game, but that is because they have never played it. You can make golf as strenuous as rope-climbing if you put your back to it; and Lawless was a thundering good player—miles ahead of Blake or I.

"They are fine links down at Seareach, Tinker," he said. "We'll have a round this afternoon, if all's well."

We reached the Imperial about three o'clock, and had a rare old feed, then, after we had changed, Lawless and I went up to the links and paid for a couple of visitors' tickets, then ambled on to the first tee.

It is just opposite the club-house, and almost in line with the eighteenth hole. While we were crossing towards it, someone played a shot up to the green, and we stopped to watch the ball.

It was a lovely shot, true as a hair, and the ball stopped dead within about nine inches from the pin.

"Some shot that—from a hundred and fifty yards," said Lawless. "And out of the rough, too."

He pointed to the right, and I saw a fellow in baggy golfing-breeches and jacket, coming towards the green. His caddy, behind him, was walking along with a grin like a sliced melon across his face—that shot seemed to have tickled him to death.

"Great Scott, what an extraordinary-looking chap!" I heard Lawless say, and I turned and looked again at the golfer.

Lawless wasn't far wrong. The man presented just about the most curious picture that I'd ever struck.

He couldn't have been more than about five-and-twenty. He was almost as tall as Lawless, and was as thin as a lathe. But it wasn't his height nor his figure that made him so grotesque.

There was nothing on his head, and his hair—a light ginger—was cropped close; not the sort of soddier-crop that leaves a little bit of hair in front for a comb to tackle, but the real prison crop. From forehead to the back of the neck the clippers had taken their

clean sweep, and his fiery, ginger hair made him fairly glist in the sun.

And, to complete the picture, there was a stubby growth of ginger whisker on his face—which had also been subjected to the clipper!

"He looks like Convict Ninety-nine," I said, staring at the man.

Lawless chuckled.

"It certainly does appear as though he'd just escaped from gaol," he returned. "I don't think I ever saw a man wear his hair and beard like that, for choice—except in the bush country, where razors are not to be had and long hair and whiskers are an abomination."

The tall chap seemed to be quite oblivious of the fact that we were staring at him far harder than was really polite. He halted on the edge of the green, and was looking back towards his opponent. His opponent was a thick-set, bull-headed man, and he had taken off his coat to his work. He was only about forty yards away from the green, but I reckon that that deadly pitch and run up to the pin made by the fellow with the convict crop had rather jolted him. Anyhow, he made an awful hash of his mashie shot, and his ball went shooting across the green and lodged itself under the fence in front of the golf-house.

"Say now, sir, but that is darned hard lines!"

The convict-crop was speaking, and his voice was the slow, cool American one that most people in this country have learned to recognise and like.

But it didn't seem to please the thick-set man, for he came across to the green with a face like a flourishing beetroot.

"I guess that gives me the odd—and—the bye!"

Lawless touched me on the arm.

"This fellow must be a bit of a player," he whispered. "His opponent is Calcott. I know him. He's a scratch man, and has a rotten temper. He hates being licked."

Calcott, the thick-set man, certainly looked as though he was swallowing something very disagreeable.

"You might have stood off the green and given me a chance," he said, in a loud, angry voice.

Now, that wasn't fair, for the tall, close-cropped man had not been anywhere near Calcott's line. I was looking at the curious chap, and I saw his long, stubble-covered chin twitch.

"If you reckon I spoiled your game, sir, I'd take it as a favour if you would have your shot over again," he said, in his slow drawl.

But Calcott had caught sight of Lawless and I, and he knew that we had been witnesses of the whole scene. I suppose he must have guessed what we thought about it, for he went on and picked up his ball.

"No; I've finished. I don't want any more golf with you!"

It was a nasty, snarly voice he used, the sort of voice that a bully has to adopt when he is in the wrong.

He came back to the green, and stuck his

hand in his pocket; then drew out a little roll of notes.

"We had a fiver on the round and double or quits on the bye," he said. "That means that I owe you ten pounds."

The lean American nodded.

"You have figured it out just right, sir," he said.

His cool voice was a rare contrast to the angry one of his opponent, and it seemed to nettie Calcott more than anything else. He counted out ten pounds, rolled them into a ball, and tossed them on the grass.

"There is your money—and I congratulate you. You must find golf a very profitable trade."

This time the other man could not help but recognise the insult in the sneering tones. He stooped and lifted the roll of notes, then came across to Calcott.

"One minute," he said, and I noticed now his voice had lost a little of the drawl. It was quieter and more English—the accent that the well-bred American adopts is not a great deal different from ours, you know. "You suggest that I have cheated you?"

Calcott's fat neck swelled.

"I did not say so," he returned. "Only you play—too well for an amateur."

The tall figure was standing very stiff now.

"I gave you my handicap, and it was you who wanted to have a fiver on the game," he said. "I did not want to make any bet, but you insisted. Is that right?"

Again Lawless nudged me.

"I'll bet it is," he whispered. "Calcott is always out to make all he can. I can see what has happened. He thought he had found a pigeon, and it has given him a shock to discover that he was mistaken."

Although Lawless and I had done nothing but stand on the edge of the green, it was obvious that both the American stranger and Calcott were regarding us as witnesses to the scene.

"Am I right, sir?" the stranger persisted.

"I usually have a bet on my games," Calcott snarled. "But one does not expect to meet ex-convicts—"

I thought the stranger would have gone for Calcott then, but he only laughed.

"You object, then, to my style of haircut," the quiet voice said. "But you must have noticed it before we started the game—or didn't it appeal to you until you were losing?"

There was a dry, cynical twang in the tones that I rather liked. It seemed to me that this stranger was worth knowing.

But Calcott didn't seem at all amused. I think he realised that his behaviour was pretty rotten, and there are some men who only get worse and worse when they find themselves in the wrong.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I don't know how to take a beating—even from a shark like you?" he snarled.

The ginger-haired man's eyes narrowed into points like gimlets. It occurred to me that we were going to have a real entertainment in about two moments.

"You called me a shark!"

"Yes."

With a flick of his hand, the stranger flung the little wad of hanknotes right into Calcott's face.

"If you weren't a fat, overfed skunk, I'd give you the licking you are asking for," said the lean stranger.

The wad of notes had caught Calcott fairly between the eyes, and the last shreds of his temper vanished then. Maybe that was what he was really waiting for, for I saw him clench his fists, and suddenly he leaped at the lanky man.

"Look out!" I cried, for the lanky one had turned as though he was going across to his caddy.

But I was mistaken; that fellow was ready for anything Calcott could do.

The thickset man was just about to let drive with his fists when the man with the prison-crop turned. I've never seen a scater duck and side-step than he gave. Calcott's fist punched the empty air, then, as he came round to make another drive at the stranger, a long, thin arm shot out and landed full on Calcott's bread-basket.

It was some punch, and Calcott made a noise like a penny halloon as he staggered back.

"If you want to fight, why not come down to the bunker?" the stranger suggested, with a glance at us—a rather merry glance, it seemed to me. "I guess we don't want to hold up the whole links while we settle our little differences."

Calcott's face was like a thunderstorm now. "I'll give you the licking you ask for," he snarled. "It is absolutely outrageous that a man cannot come down to a golf-links to enjoy a quiet game without running into riff-raff of your type."

The lanky stranger smiled. "It must be a disagreeable experience for a gentleman," he agreed. "Only, when I come to think of it, you were the man who did all the running. You came and asked me to play a round with you, although I told you I was only just up for a few practice strokes."

He turned and looked at Lawless and me. "I hope you gentlemen haven't been upset with all this," he added. "I guess that you didn't come here to listen to a quarrel."

Lawless seemed to make up his mind then, for he stepped forward and nodded to the American.

"That is quite all right," he said, in that fine voice of his. "I think I am able to judge who is in the wrong, and I'm coming over to the bunker to see the end of the affair."

Calcott had already turned, and was striding across to the links. It was a rather unusual sort of thing to happen, but, as luck would have it, no one witnessed the scene except ourselves. The stable-covered chain of the American lifted into a grin.

"Say, that's real good of you," he returned, dropping into his drawl again. "A witness would be kind of useful to me, for I'm a stranger in a strange land, and there are some customs in this little country of yours that get me licked."

So we all walked across to the bunker, to

find Calcott standing in the deep sand, with the two caddies at a respectful distance. They were going to enjoy the business, if nobody else did. They were arguing together in a fierce sort of way, and I thought at first that there would be two fights to watch. But Calcott settled that, for as soon as he saw Lawless and myself come over the top of the bunker he turned to the caddies.

"You two can clear out," he said. "Take the bags back to the club, and hold your tongues. You understand?"

I could see that both caddies were rather afraid of the thick-necked man, and they cleared off in quick time. Calcott looked at Lawless hard.

"I don't see why this matter can interest you," he said, in a surly voice.

Lawless smiled cheerily. "Don't you, Calcott? Well, it does. We happened to witness the beginning of the affair, and we might as well see the end of it."

"You know my name, it appears?" "I met you once, at Sandown," said Lawless quietly. "If I remember correctly, there was a scene with a bookmaker—"

The thickset man flushed. I heard afterwards that Calcott was rather a noted bully and a bit of a bruiser in his way. He had won a championship while he was at school, and had knocked about a great deal. Most men in the know usually gave him a wide berth. He looked a regular bully, with his square jaw and heavy face.

"I don't remember you, in any case," Calcott snapped.

He had removed his coat and was rolling up his sleeves, so that we could have a view of his muscular arms. I've known men to get scared at the sight of hrawny flesh and muscle, but I couldn't see any sight of fright on the American's long face.

He didn't remove his coat, but simply buttoned it up.

Calcott came forward. "If you are prepared to apologise—" The lean man shook his head. "Nothing doing," he returned.

The sandy floor of a bunker is not the best place for a man to move in, and Calcott seemed to have the advantage, for he was a much heavier man, and could keep his balance better on the tricky stuff. His first rush saw him all over the tall chap, and it looked as though the American was going to get a real hiding.

He went down at last with a big bruise over one eye and another on his lips. But he wasn't down for more than a second, and when he arose again I saw that he had shifted his ground slightly, so that he was standing on a part where the sand was not so deep.

Calcott came in again, holding himself in very good shape. He could certainly box a little, but he never would have made a top-notch, for his temper was too bad for that. I could see that he was out to knock lumps off his opponent, and that is all very well, so long as you've got the other man whacked. But the Yank was a long way from being whacked, and suddenly he waded into Cal-

cott in a style that fairly astounded that individual.

In about two seconds the lean stranger had landed a couple of real rib-crushers on his opponent, breaking through Calcott's guard just as though it had been made of tissue-paper.

They fell apart again, and Calcott's lips were open now, and he was breathing hard through them. I saw at once that the Yankee had found out his opponent's weak spot. There wasn't much good of hammering at that bullet head, but Calcott's body was soft—soft for want of training and too much drink and food.

"If he sticks to that attack, he's got him," Lawless whispered.

He proved a true prophet. The fight lasted another five minutes—not a very long time, but quite long enough when a man is facing a real, tough antagonist. Calcott found himself being driven back, foot by foot, across the bunker, and that convict-cut head, with its ginger crop, seemed to burn like a fame in front of him. The long arms moved like pistons, and I think that Calcott's whole body must have been just one big bruise, for the American punched him as one might punch a bag.

Once or twice Calcott tried to work into a clinch, but that wanted some doing. To get into a clinch you've got to move quickly, and the heavy sand made that work impossible. All the American did was to stand off and just shoot out his fist as Calcott tried to close. He seemed to know just where to land every blow, and the way he stopped his opponent's blundering rushes made me feel inclined to cheer.

They were right under the big bunker when the end came. Calcott had been sent staggering back against the high sides of the bunker, and had put his hands behind him to save himself from falling. By doing this he left himself completely open to another whirlwind attack, but the tall chap just backed away a pace and waited for Calcott to recover himself.

That was pretty sportsmanlike of him, and I admired him for it; but no one ought ever to try to play the chivalrous game when a man like Calcott is facing him.

The thickest, hully knew that he was whacked. He knew that this quiet stranger could beat him, not only at golf but also at boxing, and that sort of brought out all the dirty blood in the beggar.

It was Lawless who twiggod what was going to happen. Calcott's right hand was pressed on a jagged piece of flint that was embedded in the sand. I suppose that it was only a sudden impulse brought about by his mad anger; but in a moment Calcott had forced the stone out of its place and, with a snarling oath, lunged forward, and swung his hand above his head.

"Look out!"

Lawless sent the shout up, and he made a plunge down the bunker. He could never have reached Calcott in time, but his warning cry did the trick. That American was as quick as an eel, and even as Calcott swung the jagged flint at him he ducked

swiftly, and the stone just grazed his close-cropped pate.

Then, quicker than I could follow, the American went into his man. It seemed as though that curvy trick had really angered him at last, and for a long time he fairly smothered Calcott with a shower of blows, and finished off with a deft side-step and a swing of his right fist that landed with the snap of a mule's hind legs on the stout jaw of his opponent.

The crack of the concession of hard knuckles and bone sounded like a report, and I knew that it was "sloopy-by" for Calcott. He crumpled up like a pricked balloon and dropped in the sand of the bunker, to lie there snorting like a grampus.

Lawless was beside the American by now, and they both looked down at Calcott.

"I guess he'll come round in a moment," the lean man said.

Lawless loosened Calcott's collar, and turned away.

"I should leave him to it if I were you, Mr.—"

"Blenkers, sir. My name is Edwin Fraser Blenkers, of Oregon," said the stranger.

Lawless held out his hand, and the stranger took it.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Blenkers," Lawless said. "You have given a bully a very needed lesson in manners."

They came across the bunker, and Lawless introduced me to Blenkers.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Tinker," he said. "I hope that you haven't been too disgusted by this display of animal passions and—darned bad manners."

I grinned. There was something about that cool voice that I liked, and it seemed to me that Lawless also was finding a lot about Edwin Blenkers that appealed to him.

We moved out of the bunker and left Calcott to himself. I guessed that he would recover much quicker if we went, and I wasn't mistaken, for before we had reached the first green Lawless saw Calcott slip along beside the fence and vanish into the golf-club.

"I don't think you'll be troubled by Calcott again," he said drily. "And now, if you feel inclined, I'd like you to join Tinker and I for another round."

Blenkers looked at him.

"Say, that is real good of you," he said. "I know what it means, too, and I'm much obliged."

We could see that there was a knot of men standing on the verandah of the club, and Calcott joined them. He seemed to be talking very rapidly, swinging his arms about and pointing in our direction. I think that Lawless had also noticed this, and that was why he asked Blenkers to join us. For every member of the committee knew the Honourable John Lawless, and the mere fact of his inviting that American to join us in a game showed pretty clearly what Lawless thought of the incident that had happened.

He was accepting the man with the convict cut as a friend, and Blenkers knew what that meant. Calcott could not harm him, no matter what manner of lies he might tell.

We played that round, and I admit that I was right out of it. That American played like a Baird, and it took Lawless all his time to just snatch a one-hole victory on the last green. When we went into the club-house I saw that Calcott had gone, and one of the committee came across to Lawless and drew him on one side.

Later on, when we were going back to the Imperial, Lawless told me what had happened.

"Calcott tried to make all sorts of charges against our friend," he said. "But I don't think that any of them will do much harm. Fortunately, the committee know Calcott fairly well, and I added my word. I don't think we will see him on the links again for a bit. I wondered what he was doing down here at all."

Blenkers was with us in the car; we found that he was also staying at the Imperial, and of course we gave him a lift. He leaned forward and said:

"I can enlighten you on that point," he said. "Mr. Calcott told me that he had put in for the appointment of governor of Bralmoor Prison, and he was expecting to get the post any day now. That was why he was staying here, for Bralmoor is only ten miles away across the downs."

"A governor of a prison?" I said. "Then goodness help the convicts!"

"Now I think I've got as sharp eyes as most people, and I was looking at Blenkers as I spoke. It seemed to me that his face changed and a curious light came into his eyes. But it was gone in a moment, and he laughed.

"I can't say that I should like to be a prisoner under him," he returned. "Maybe that was why he didn't seem to like my style of beauty."

Lawless chuckled.

"He will see plenty of men like you at Bralmoor; that is to say, so far as the hair and the chin, I mean."

The American grinned.

"I'm getting used to it," he said. "There is no law to prevent a man cutting his hair just as he likes, even in this funny little island, sir. But I can tell you that I've had some mighty queer adventures, and I never travel far without my papers and passports. The way a policeman looks at me would make you think I was the one little lost lamb in the world, and he was the hungry shepherd bursting to get me back into the fold!"

"I can quite believe that," I said. "We don't even nuke our convicts to turn out with a crop like that when their time is up. They are always allowed to let their hair grow a decent length, so that they won't be branded. But you seem to like it, and it's a free country."

That night Lawless and I found out a lot more about Blenkers. He was occupying the best suite in the whole hotel, and had been there for over a month. Everybody in Seacreech knew him now, for he was an easy-going sort, and, despite his strange appearance, had a knack of making friends.

In the lounge Lawless met a fine-looking old fellow, whom he introduced to me as

Sir Henry Armytage, who had once been British Ambassador at Washington. Presently Blenkers came into the room in his well-cut evening clothes, and he nodded to Sir Henry as he passed.

The contrast between the splendid white shirt and dress-suit and the close-cropped head and stubby chin was so startling that it made me grin.

"I should say that he takes a lot of getting accustomed to, Lawless," I said. "There must be hundreds of old women who, meeting him in a dark lane, would have a fit!"

Sir Henry laughed.

"Meaning Blenkers, of course," he said. "Yes, he is certainly eccentric. But he was just as famous in Washington last year. He has been going about like an escaped convict—British pattern—for the last eighteen months, to my knowledge."

"You met him in the States, then, Sir Henry?" said Lawless.

"Oh, yes. Several times. He is quite a wealthy youngster, and comes from a very old family. They once expected him to develop into a politician, but for this last two years or so he has simply idled about the world. It is rather a pity, for he has plenty of brains, and is by no means a fool."

We both grinned.

"Tinker and I had ample proofs of that this afternoon," said Lawless. "Blenkers knows how to look after himself, if he is eccentric."

Sir Henry insisted on hearing the story, and he smiled when Calcott's name was mentioned.

"Strangely enough, I was at the Home Office yesterday, and I heard that he had been given the appointment as governor of a prison quite close to here. I don't know how they came to give him the job, but I suppose he has some influence. Anyhow, he would be in his element, I should think. But I would not be a convict under him, if I could avoid it."

Lawless set his square chin.

"It is wrong to give a man like that such a position," he said. "He can allow his tyrannical disposition to have full sway, and that is always bad."

The baronet nodded towards Blenkers, who had curled himself in a chair, and was smoking a foot-long cheroot.

"Sometimes the tyrant finds it does not pay him—as Calcott did this afternoon, according to your account," he chuckled.

The lounge of the Imperial wants a lot of beating as a comfy sort of crib. There are heaps of those fat chairs that a fellow can sprawl into, and forget all his troubles. I was pretty tired after the golf, and reckon I must have fallen into a half-snooze when I was awakened by old Lawless nudging me on the arm.

"Rouse yourself, you sleepy beggar," he said. "I want you to cast your eyes across the room. Who is that in the doorway?"

I looked across in the direction of the door. A man had just entered, and was regarding the thronged lounge quietly. He was about middle-height, and was well-dressed. A clipped grizzly moustache covered

his upper lip and his hair was grey at the temples. He had those heavy, bushy eyebrows that go with a hard face. And, goodness knows, his face was hard enough. There was the mark of an old scar running down one side of it from temple to jaw.

"Haven't you ever seen him before, Tinker?"

Now, I was just thinking the very same thing. The man in the doorway was not the kind of fellow that one would forget easily. I knew that he was associated with some event in the past, but I am not quite such a good hand at remembering faces as my governor, and although I was pretty sure that I had seen the man before, I could not just locate him.

"His face is familiar, but I can't place it yet," I said.

Sir Henry leaned back. "I know him, slightly," he said. "He was on board the *Bartie* when I came back from the States. There was some trouble in the saloon, and he was warned from the card-tables. The name he went under then was James Vanley. I suppose that was as good as any other name to him."

"A card-sharper?" said Lawless.

The ex-ambassador nodded.

"Worse than that, I am afraid," he returned. "There was a high police official travelling on the *Bartie*, and he gave me a few particulars concerning this fellow. It appears that he is by the way of being a master-rogue. He never takes any risks himself, but he is the organiser. He plans the deals, and lets his subordinates carry them out. Radbury, the official I mentioned, seemed rather glad to see that Vanley was heading for Europe. He had been in the States for three years, and Radbury admitted that there were cases which looked like his work. But he is as cunning as a fox, and has never been bowled over yet."

The man Vanley was moving slowly across the lounge now. No one paid much attention to him except ourselves. The guests of the *Imperial* were just the usual assortment of holiday-making Englishmen, and they never trouble to study anyone else.

"I thought he looked a crook," said Lawless slowly, "and I was hoping that Tinker here might identify him."

"I will presently," I returned. "He is associated with something that I cannot just collar yet, but it will come back."

"Well, whatever it was, it must have happened over three years ago, if it took place in this country," Sir Henry remarked.

"Those fellows usually work a country until it gets too hot for them, and then they beat a retreat for a season. I don't like to see that type of man turn up here. I think I ought to drop a hint to the manager."

Vanley had almost reached the other side of the room, and now we saw where he was heading. He went right up to the chair that Blenkers was sitting in and touched the lean American on the arm. Blenkers looked up then, arose to his feet, and held out his hand.

"Hallo, Vanley! So you've come at last!" he said, with a broad grin.

The way that he welcomed the fellow

rather knocked us. If Vanley had been Blenkers's best friend he could not have received a more hearty shake of the hand. The lanky fellow slipped his arm under that of the "crook," and we saw them both go off towards the bar.

"Humph! Now what are we to make of that?" Lawless said, with a half-laugh.

Sir Henry looked down his long, aristocratic nose. You see, he had been saying a lot of nice things about Blenkers, and it rather took the wind out of his sails to see that individual hobnob with a man whom he vowed was a well-known crook.

"Blenkers doesn't know his man," he said at last. "I suppose he must have met him in the States, but he cannot know his reputation!"

Lawless stretched himself in his chair.

"I don't think that Blenkers is the sort of chap to be taken in by anyone," he said slowly. "My opinion of him is that he's just about as cute as they make them. And he hailed Vanley as though they had met by appointment—as though he had expected him."

He looked at the baronet and smiled.

"I don't think I'd go to the trouble of warning the manager yet, Sir Henry," he went on. "It is a very curious position, you see. Blenkers has taken Vanley under his wing, and that would imply that they are birds of a feather. You cannot very well get Vanley shifted without disturbing Blenkers, can you?"

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"I am going away on Monday, so it does not matter very much so far as I am concerned," he returned. "But if you are going to stay on here I should certainly give Vanley a wide berth."

Later on in the evening Lawless looked into my room for a moment.

"I've been doing a bit of quiet detective work, young 'un," he said, "and I find that Blenkers has arranged that Vanley should have the spare room in his suite. He had arranged this when he first came here, and has been waiting for Vanley to turn up."

"That looks as though they were pretty good friends," I said.

Lawless sat down on the corner of my bed and lighted a cigarette.

"Yes, it does," he admitted. "Yet I cannot understand it. I'd bet anything that Vanley is a rogue, and I'd equally stake a good deal on Blenkers being the exact opposite. The point is, why should Blenkers make a friend of a man like that?"

I was rather sleepy, and it seemed to me that Lawless was putting his ear into something that was no concern of his.

"Why should you worry?" I asked.

Lawless laughed.

"Because I like Blenkers," he returned. "There is something about that eccentric fellow that appeals to me. I like his eye; it is as steady as a rock; and I like his smile. In fact, I've made up my mind to be a pal of his, if he will let me. But I'm hanged if I'm going to pal up with that Vanley man."

"But how are you going to work one without the other?" I asked.

"That is what I've got to discover," Lawless said. "I'm going to prove to Blenkers that Vanley is a rotter, and then we'll see how the thing shapes."

He sauntered out of the room, and I didn't trouble to try to stop him and argue the point. John Lawless is the sort of man that gets a bee in his bonnet on occasions, and no power on earth can make him change his mind.

But it struck me as I tumbled into bed that there was the making of a mighty big packet of trouble in his project, and I didn't have to wait very long before I proved that my prophecy was correct.

CHAPTER 2.

Lawless Exposes a Rogue, and Meets with an Unexpected Rebuff—The Mystery Deepens, and Sexton Blake Supplies the Lacking Clue—Vanley Tries to Pump Sam, and Gets a Nasty Jar.

ABOUT ten o'clock on the following morning I met Sam just outside the hotel, and the black fellow told me that his haas had gone mad.

"You'd never guess what dat haas ob mine has been doin' all morning, Tinker," he said. "No, you'd never guess, not if you was to try for a thousand years."

"I'm not going to try for ten minutes, Sam," I said. "Just cough it off now, old son. What has your haas been getting up to?"

Sam pointed down the road.

"There's a gentleman down there dat looks as though he'd jest come out ob jail," he began. "I saw him this morning, and told the haas about him. He's down along with an old man dat's breaking a heap of stones by the roadside, and the gentleman with the prison-crop am helping him to break dem stones."

Sam grinned like a second Cheshire cat.

"Whacking into dem with de hammer as though his life depended on it," he went on. "I told de haas, and dashed if he didn't go down there and start to work as well."

He shook his head at me.

"Dat ain't a gentleman's work, Tinker, dat nint," he ended. "Breaking stone by de wayside am all very well for a no-class nigger, or some poor old white, but gentlemen don't do it, unless they am catched for something, and shoved into jail."

I had to laugh at Sam's idea of how and why a gentleman should start breaking stones, but I went off down the road, and presently I heard the click, click of hammers, and sure enough there was Lawless and the man with the prison-crop whacking away at the chunks of granite as though their lives depended on it, and this, mind you, in the main road, where everyone could see them.

Lawless saw me coming and straightened up for a moment.

"Come along, young 'un," he cried. "Just see what sort of shift you can make of this?"

But I wasn't having any of that sort of

sport, and Blenkers dropped his hammer and came across to me. I saw his hands then, and they surprised me. They were hacked and roughened, with badly broken nails—the hands of a navvy rather than a gentleman.

I had not noticed them before, but I saw then that all that could not have happened in one morning.

"Is this a usual morning task for you, Mr. Blenkers?" I asked.

That wide, refreshing grin crossed the long, tanned face.

"Yes, I've been helping old Joe here for weeks now. Haven't I, Joe?"

The old stone-breaker looked up and nodded his head.

"That be true, sir," he said. "And you be getting a rare good 'un at it and all. I haven't got to teach you where the grain runs now, thet I haven't."

Blenkers seemed as proud of this praise as though Joe was a learned professor.

"It is the finest cure for indigestion I've ever struck," he went on, turning to me.

"But you don't look as though you suffered from indigestion," I returned, and he grinned again.

"Can't say that I do, but I might, you know, and it is just as well to get your hand in."

Lawless flung his hammer across to the old chap and joined us. He'd been slogging at his job and was in a rare sweat.

"Is it your digestive apparatus that you are working on as well?" I asked.

He gave me a swift wink.

"I've been helping Blenkers," he said cheerily. "I want him to come and have another game of golf, and he wouldn't promise because he'd to finish that pile of stones first. So I waded in and helped him."

Blenkers nodded.

"I set myself to finish that heap, and I guess it would have taken me all morning, but Mr. Lawless sort of waded in, and we're through now."

I thought that there was rather a grim smile in his eyes as he looked at Lawless.

"We've got time for a round before lunch,"

Lawless remarked. "Although I don't see how you are going to hold a club with your hands in that state?"

Blenkers turned his palms upwards. They were really in a shocking condition, with several painful-looking blisters and cracks.

"They will be all right," he said. "They were much worse a week ago, couldn't close them at night."

The old stonebreaker leaned forward.

"That comes o' wetting them," he said. "I told you not to do that. It always makes them worse, but you jest keep on doing it."

Blenkers stooped and lifted a handful of dust and rubbed it over his hands, making them grimmer than ever.

"Now, look what you've done!" the old chap gasped. "That only makes them worse and worse. And they was so white and soft when you started!"

"Then it serves them right for being so darned white and soft," said the extraordinary man, as he turned away.

We set off for the hotel, and I noticed

that the over-dressed figure of the crook was lounging in the vestibule. Lawless and I dropped back, and Blenkers turned to speak to Vanley for a few moments, and nodded in our direction. The crook did not seem very pleased, for he scowled at us, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned and went into the writing-room.

When Lawless and I were walking down the corridor towards our rooms, the big man suddenly halted.

"Look here, Tinker," he said, "I'm going to make a diversion. I want you to go to the links with Blenkers and play a round with him. Tell him that I will come along immediately. You can say that I have had a telegram, and have to answer it. But I won't be on the links at all to-day."

"Where will you be?" I asked.

He smiled.

"Wherever Vanley chooses to go," he said. "I'm going to get on that fellow's track at once. I don't like him fastening on to Blenkers, and if I can bowl him over I mean to do it."

"It looks to me as though we're going to hatch some trouble," I said. "But, in any case, this isn't my funeral, and you can do what you like. I came down here to play golf, not to tackle crooks. I get enough of that when I am at work, without indulging in it when on holiday."

"That's why I don't want you to help," he returned. "I'll handle this little affair on my lonesome. All you have to do is to keep Blenkers busy until about tea-time."

But that was a job that wasn't so easy to do. Blenkers swallowed the telegram yarn all right, and we played a round in which he gave me a stroke at every two holes—and a beating. But when we went back to the clubhouse for lunch, and Blenkers saw that Lawless hadn't turned up, I thought he seemed to fidget a little.

"We will give him until two o'clock," he said. "He ought to get here by that time."

I tried to start him off for another round, but he was not having any. When two came, he came up to me and looked at me for a moment.

"Say, Tinker," he said, "was it a plant or a straight deal that you two guys handed me out this morning?"

I tried to look innocent, but it didn't seem to work.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Blenkers," I said.

The man with the convict-crop grinned.

"Then you are getting mighty dense," he returned. "I had a half-notion that Lawless wanted to steer me out of the way this morning, but I could not just see why. Anyhow, he's worked it all right, but I think we'd get back to the Imperial. I've a very inquiring mind, Tinker, and it makes me always want to know—like the man from Missouri."

Of course, I could not very well stop Blenkers from going back to the hotel if he wanted to, so we boicked for the car. As soon as I reached the hotel I saw that something had happened. There were a lot of people hanging about in the lounge, and the way they nudged each other and looked

at Blenkers made me realize that he was mixed up in what had happened.

I did not have long to wait before I found out what it was all about.

One of the porters must have twigged Blenkers and me, for before we could reach the lift the manager came out and crossed to us.

He looked worried to death, and he turned to Blenkers.

"I am sorry that this thing has happened, Mr. Blenkers," he said. "I can assure you that it was not the fault of the hotel staff."

Blenkers looked at him for a moment, then at the crowd.

"Perhaps we'd better go into your office," he suggested.

He gave me a nod, and I followed. As soon as we were in the office the man with the convict-crop nodded his head.

"Now, sir," he said to the manager, "I'm listening."

The manager looked surprised.

"Do you mean that you do not know what has happened?"

Blenkers smiled.

"All I know is that Tinker here has something to learn at golf yet," he said, with that merry twinkle in his eye that we all liked. "He's a tryer, mind you, and if he only remembered to keep his eye a little longer on the ball he'd come on."

The manager cleared his throat.

"Well, sir, Mr. Vanley has been arrested."

I never saw such an extraordinary change as took place on Blenkers's face. I couldn't quite describe that look. There was something of grim satisfaction in it, and yet there was also doubt, and even annoyance.

"Arrested! What for?"

He seemed to hang on the manager's words.

"He was found in your room, sir," the manager said. "He had opened your valise, and had taken some money—forty or fifty pounds."

Blenkers's face slid back into his old, easy, expressionless line. I think he had the greatest control of his feelings of any man I ever met. You could never really tell what Blenkers was thinking about, not if you studied him for a week.

"Now, that's surely very interesting," he drawled. "Mr. Vanley was in my room, was he? And who found him there?"

"The Honourable Mr. Lawless," said the manager, giving Lawless his full title. "I don't think that Blenkers had known until then that my tall friend was likely one day to be an earl."

"Oh, Mr. Lawless saw him, did he?"

Blenkers looked across at me with his shrewd eyes, and I knew that that look meant. He evidently thought that this explained Lawless's little scheme; but, if it did, I knew nothing about it, and I said so.

"Not guilty, Blenkers," said I; and he laughed, then turned to the manager again.

"Maybe you can give me the details," he queried.

The manager told his story. A chambermaid had come down to him just before lunch, and had asked him to go up to visit

"B"—Blenkers's suite that was—at once. He had gone there, and had found Lawless standing in Blenkers's room, covering Vanley with a revolver.

"This man is a thief," Lawless had reported. "I saw him open that valise and take some money out of it. The money is now in his breast-pocket; just relieve him of it."

The manager had obeyed the command, and had found the little wad of five-pound notes. He had recognised them as being ones he had given to the tall American on the previous day when cashing a cheque.

"What did Mr. Vanley say?" Blenkers asked slowly.

The manager shrugged his shoulders. "He had nothing at all to say, sir," he replied. "I am afraid that you have been deceived by that man, for a very well-known gentleman in the hotel—Sir Henry Armytage, who was once ambassador at Washington—has since assured me that Vanley is a well-known crook, a card-sharper, and a danger to society. His reputation in your country, Mr. Blenkers, is of the worst, although he has been too clever to actually let himself fall into the hands of the police, so far."

Blenkers hardly seemed to hear the manager. He was staring across the room with a fixed, grim light in his eyes.

"It was very fortunate that Mr. Lawless chanced to discover the fellow in the very act," the manager ended, "otherwise there is not the slightest doubt but what you would have blamed someone of my staff for the theft. I don't know how Vanley managed to get the key of your bedroom."

The tall American straightened up, and I saw his shoulders tighten.

"I can explain that, sir," he said. "I gave him the key!"

The manager stared.

"You gave him the key?" Blenkers was talking in a dead-level voice. "Yes; and I told him where he could find that money, if he wanted some!"

The way that manager's jaw dropped was a sight to behold. He looked as though he could have been bowled over by a feather.

"Then you—you knew that he might help himself?"

"Exactly! Now, let me get right on to the telephone, and we'll ring up the police. I guess this thing has got to be squared right now."

I caught Blenkers's eye as he passed, and there was a glimmer of dry humour in it that I could not understand. The manager flustered about like a broody hen until he reached the telephone in the sitting-room of the suite. He called up the police-station, then held the receiver to the tall American.

"The inspector is there now, sir," he said.

As Blenkers took the receiver the manager looked at me and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Here's a pretty mess-up," he groaned under his voice. "What the deuce am I to do now, Mr. Tinker?"

We were pretty old friends, and he knew my profession. I could see that he was expecting all sorts of developments in the way

of damages for wrongful arrest, etc., and I thought it wise to put in a word.

"It isn't your death at all," I murmured. "Lawless will have to stand for it, whatever happens."

Meanwhile, Blenkers was talking to the inspector, and I listened to his cool drawl.

"Yes, my name is Blenkers. That's right. I'm the man who is supposed to have been robbed."

"No; it is all a mistake. Mr. Vanley is my friend; he has the spare room of my suite here, and he had my full permission to borrow that bunch of notes, if he needed them."

"Yes, of course. There is no charge, so you'll have to let him go!"

The inspector seemed to make a rather long speech, for there was a pause. Blenkers listened with his lips tightly compressed and a dry smile on his face.

"I can't help that, inspector," he said. "Vanley may be the real 'dedo' bird of crooks, but I can't rush him for a charge that ain't honest. So far as I am concerned, he took that money with my permission, and I climb into the witness-box on that score."

He listened for another moment, then I heard him chuckle.

"Thanks for the advice, inspector. Maybe you're right; but Vanley has not tried to do me yet, and I think I'll just sit up and wait till it happens before I quit his company. Good-bye!"

He replaced the receiver and arose to his feet, stretching his long, lean body.

"That's all right," he said lazily. "The inspector is releasing my friend Mr. Vanley right now. I guess I'll go along and meet him."

Then he nodded to the manager, whose troubled face revealed his anxiety.

"I think I'll manage to smooth things over so far as you are concerned," Blenkers went on. "But I guess you'd better get round the hotel and explain all about the mistake. I didn't know that I'd got to publish my private financial arrangements with my friends! But if that is the custom in this country, I'll take care to issue bulletins in future."

The dry humour in his voice was delicious, and I had to grin. He gave me one of his quick, searching looks; then, when the manager had gone out of the room, he came across to me and looked me square in the eyes.

"Your friend Lawless made a mistake, but you can tell him in private that I don't bear any malice. I guess he did it because he figured out that he liked me, and I like him."

"I know he does," I returned. "And I also know that he thinks you are in rotten bad company when you are with Vanley."

Blenkers nodded his head.

"I guess Vanley carries his carte-de-visite on his face," he said grimly. "But that is neither here nor there. If I make a friend of a man, it is because I want to."

Then he suddenly fired off a query that took me completely by surprise.

"I've been skrimishing round finding out

things about you," he said. "Where is your master, Sexton Blake?"

"In France," I returned.

Blenkers crossed the room slowly.

"Any chance of his coming back to England soon?"

The governor had not set any definite time for his return, but I knew that he would not stay away from Baker Street any longer than he could help.

"He might be back any day now," I said.

"He is well-known in Paris, isn't he?"

"Rather. There isn't a capital city on the Continent that does not know him," I put in.

Blenkers grinned.

"Curious thing, that," he returned. "The inspector that I spoke to just now said just the same thing about my friend Vanley. Your master stands on one side of the law, and the crooks on the other. But they all enjoy the same 'force white light' of publicity, don't they?"

I smiled.

"That is so, but the crook would rather have it the other way."

Blenkers sauntered out of the room then, and I went down into the lounge a little later. I could see from the way that the guests were jawing away in groups that the manager had been as good as his word, and Blenkers's story about the affair was going the rounds. One or two of the men started in my direction, but I didn't want to be cross-examined, so I dodged out of the hotel, and met Lawless and Sir Henry coming up the steps together.

One look at Lawless told me that he knew all about it.

"We met Mr. Blenkers just now," Sir Henry said in a very stiff and angry tone.

"My impression of that man is that he is either mad or a fool."

He was very ruffled and on his dignity, and he went on into the hotel, leaving Lawless and I together. The big chap seemed to take his reverse easily enough, for he laughed suddenly.

"My little plan went 'phut!' after all," he said with a sigh. "It was a pity, for it was a great scheme!"

"What did you do?"

"I've been playing poker with Vanley all the morning, and I won all his spare cash," he said. "He didn't get a chance to bluff me, for he was playing straight. Just before lunch I hinted that we ought to make the game worth while—crack up the stakes a bit—and I saw that he took the bait."

He laughed grimly.

"I know that men like Vanley never travel with much cash, and of course he would have to make some sort of show. I watched him, and saw him dodge into Blenkers's room, and I caught him red-handed."

He turned, and we began to walk down the path towards the gates of the grounds.

"Mind you, I don't think that Vanley was going to steal that wad of notes," he observed. "His idea was just to flash them in front of me, then set to work and clean me out. He could easily have slipped back to the room and replaced his borrowed money without Blenkers being a whit the wiser."

"Vanley isn't the sort of man who would

risk imprisonment for the sake of a few fivers," he added. "But, you see, I caught him before he had time to think."

"I thought that a petty theft like that wasn't exactly up to Vanley's reputation," I returned.

Lawless chuckled again.

"You ought to have seen his face," he returned. "He was clean bowled, and was more disgusted than anything else. But, by James, he will have the laugh of us after all, and he will know that I deliberately tried to trap him! I wonder why the blues a decent chap like Blenkers should stand up and lie for a skunk like that?"

"You think it was a lie?"

He turned and stared at me.

"Think, young 'un? Good heavens, I know! Why, while I was covering Vanley and waiting for the manager to come up he gave the thing away completely. He first tried to bribe me to let him out of the fix, then he asked me if it was Blenkers who had put me up to watching him!"

Lawless shrugged his shoulders.

"That proves that there were no financial arrangements," I murmured.

"It beats me, young 'un," the big man returned, "and I think in future I'll give up trying to help anyone I like. Blenkers gave me a lecture just now—a lecture, mind you, on the virtues of minding my own blinking business!"

I had to laugh, for I could almost hear that cool, drawing voice.

"Blenkers is a mystery," I said. "There is something behind this attitude of his."

There are moments when I get a sort of inspiration—the gov'nor calls it my psychic side—and I had it then.

"He's going to be worth studying," I went on. "Have you ever met any other man who went about as he does? It is all very well to want to be eccentric, but men who are eccentric reveal that in a dozen ways, not in only one or two. Blenkers plays golf like a pro., boxes well, and seems to have all his wits about him. He handled this affair in a way that could not have been bettered, from his point of view."

"That is true enough, young 'un," Lawless agreed. "Not many men would have had the nerve to state that he had given carte blanche to Vanley in that way."

"He made it up as soon as the manager explained," I returned. "It came out pat enough—but it was a thundering crammer/all the same. And why should he tell lies to save a skunk like Vanley—unless he wanted something out of Vanley?"

Lawless looked at me, and shook his head.

"Now you are wading out of your depth, Tinker," he remarked.

"Am I? Well, we'll see. But when a man walks about like a convict newly released from gaol; when he spends hours breaking stones and mending up his hands, and when he associates with rogues of the Vanley type. I am not going to believe that it is all to be put down to eccentricity."

I fired this noble speech off my chest, and felt happier afterwards. It was really the "psychic" stuff that was at work, for I

couldn't really find any reason for Blenkers's conduct.

"That is all very well," said Lawless. "You point out all these funny things, but you don't say why or how. And until you do that Blenkers has the beating of you."

Of course, he was right. And it began to worry me no end. I am a bit of a worrier when I hit up against something that I don't quite fathom. That chap Blenkers was threatening to haunt my dreams, and I found myself getting as keen as mustard.

Before that night was over I had promised myself that I would get to the bottom of this mysterious business or die in the attempt. So there I was opposed to be down at Seareach for a week-end's golf, and now I was up to the neck in a mystery that was really no concern of mine at all. No one had asked me to look into Blenkers's actions. He had not robbed anyone or committed any crime, and yet he balked in front of me as a real, solid mystery.

It was rather amusing in the lounge that night, for Blenkers came in, arm in arm with Vanley, and they stopped at one big group of men, and chatted for a moment. The bunch of men had, all of them, been quite convinced that Vanley was a thieving skunk—he looked it, remember. But, with Blenkers to back him up, the hard-faced crook worked the "let-hygones-be-hygones" stunt for all he was worth.

There was a lot of clinking glasses and "Good healths!" business, and once Vanley looked across at where Lawless and I were sitting with a leer on his ugly jowl that made me want to get up and punch it.

"Let him enjoy himself," Lawless said coolly. "It is all on the surface, young 'un. He knows that we know him, and his high horse is really a spavined old mount."

Next day was Saturday, and we saw Blenkers and Vanley go off in a hired car together to the links. The tall American was giving us the frozen shoulder all right, and Lawless seemed to feel that part more than any other.

"I'd like to punch his head," he confessed. "Only he's such a fine golf-player."

He took it so badly that we did not go to the links, and simply mooned about, putting on one of the lawns in front of the hotel. About five o'clock in the afternoon a telegraph-boy arrived, and gave me a wire.

Lawless was by my side when I opened it.

"Got your wire about Lawless. Will be Seareach seven-thirty p.m.—Blake."

I had to read that message twice, then I handed it to Lawless.

"Now what the blazes does that mean?" I asked.

Lawless read the wire, then looked at me.

"What have you been saying about me, you young cub?" he asked.

I laughed.

"Nothing. I've never been near a telegraph-office since I landed here. I don't even know where it is!"

We stared at each other then for a moment. The wire had been sent off from

Calais at 2 p.m. That meant that the gov'nor had started from Paris early in the morning.

"This is a pretty how-de-do," Lawless went on. "Blake is coming here hand-over-fist because he thinks that something has happened to me. What will he say when he sees us?"

"Well, you don't think that he'll shower blessings, do you?" I said. "It looks as though he's been dragged away from Paris, and it's more than likely he hasn't finished his job there."

- A rather stupid idea came to me.

"I wonder if Sam sent the message?" I asked.

It occurred to me that Sam may have heard something about what had happened in the hotel on the previous day, and may have got things mixed up a little. But when we looked him up in the garage, where he was cleaning the Sunbeam, he rolled his eyes indignantly at the bare mention of the thing.

"I guess dat's one of your ideas, Tinker," he grumbled. "I don't go and send no fool telegrams like dat. Of course, I knowed dat the haas had been stirring up trouble, but I wasn't worrying."

I soothed him down then, and Lawless and I started off for the town. Of course, we could not very well stop the gov'nor now, but I made up my mind to find out all I could about that other message.

I thought it best to go to the police-station first and see the inspector there. I explained about the message, and he said he would come round with us to the post-office.

On the way he unburdened himself about Vanley.

"It beats me, Tinker," he admitted. "The fellow was absolutely scared to death. If ever a man looked as though he felt himself cornered, it was that skunk. I'd only been told that he was in Seareach that same morning. Scotland Yard has been keeping touch with him, you know, for they had the warning from the other side when he left New York."

He heaved a sigh.

"It looked a fair capture, and I was feeling lucked, I can tell you. I even telephoned the news to the Yard, and you ought to have heard the joy-bells sounding from that side. Vanley has been running for over ten years now. His hand has been in a dozen things, but they've never been able to collar him."

"It was hard lines on you," said Lawless. The inspector turned to him.

"I don't know who I am sorest with—Vanley or Mr. Blenkers," he returned. "Only the latter is not in the crook line. He seemed to me to be backing up Vanley more than he needed. Of course, if he did give the rascal permission to help himself to his spare cash, that cleared Vanley. But it makes out Blenkers to be just about the softest noodle that ever happened; and he doesn't look it, sir, he doesn't look it."

We reached the post-office, and the inspector had a word with the postmaster, with the result that in a few minutes the original message was placed in front of Lawless and I.

It had been sent off at 7 p.m. on the previous evening, and on the back of the form was the stamped address of the Imperial Hotel. While, of course, the name of the sender was there, large as life:

"Tinker."

"Well, that isn't my signature, in any case," I said.

The postmaster shook his head.

"Oh, no; I recognise the handwriting," he explained. "It is the girl in the booking-office at the hotel. We often get messages through from her which are dictated by the guests there. I expect that it was one of the page-boys who brought it down."

He went out into the public part of the office, and returned with one of his assistants.

"This is the young lady that took the message. It was brought by a boy called Wallis, who is employed as one of the lift-boys at the Imperial."

That settled the matter so far, and we would have to go back to the hotel to do the rest. But it was getting on for seven by now, and Lawless and I decided to have a snack in the town, then go to the station and meet the gov'nor.

"I feel half-inclined to get the inspector to lock me up," said Lawless, with a grin. "It would be the easiest way of explaining that wire."

For the message sent from Seareach ran:

"Sexton Blake, c/o British Embassy, Paris.
"Lawless in trouble. Can you come at once?—Tinker, Imperial Hotel, Seareach."

"It wouldn't be a bad scheme," I agreed. "But I don't think we could get the inspector to do any more arresting after what happened yesterday."

"Humph! I don't suppose we could," said Lawless.

We had our snack and got to the railway-station. The train was up to time, and we saw the gov'nor come out of a compartment. He looked as fit as a fiddle, and I felt darned glad to see him again, even although it was a faked message that had brought him.

He caught sight of Lawless and me, and stopped dead on the platform to stare at us.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he said. "So you've managed without me?"

Lawless and I both started to explain, and I think we must have cut a funny figure, for suddenly the gov'nor laughed.

"So somebody has been getting at you, eh?" he remarked. "Well, we will certainly have to find out who it was."

He took it so well that I suddenly guessed the reason.

"It looks to me as though you were glad to get that message, gov'nor," I said.

He smiled.

"To tell you the truth, I was, Tinker. I'd finished up my job, but they wanted me to stay behind—they were going to give me a farewell dinner to-night—and there would have been speeches and things."

Lawless went off into a laugh.

"Then, by Jemee, that message saved you

something, after all," he remarked. "I know how you hate having to get on your feet and reply to all the nice things that have been said about you."

He was quite bucked by the way the gov'nor took the matter, and he grabbed up one of Blake's valises and found a taxi in quick time.

"We'll be in time for dinner at the hotel, if we get a jerk into it," he said.

It was only a few minutes past eight when we landed at the Imperial, and while the gov'nor was booking his room I made inquiries about that telegram.

The girl seemed to think that I was joking at first.

"It is all right, Mr. Tinker," she said. "You will find it charged up to you in your bill."

I had to explain to her then, and she looked amazed.

"But I answered the 'phone myself, and your number is one-fifty-six, isn't it?"

The Imperial is one of those swanky places that have a 'phone in every room.

"Yes, that is my number," I said.

"Well, the message came down about six o'clock yesterday," the girl explained. "And, of course, I sent it off at once."

"So you don't really know who sent it?" Lawless put in.

The girl shook her head.

"I didn't take much notice of the voice, but it rather sounded like Mr. Tinker's," she returned. "And—well, I thought it was genuine enough, for—for there had been a little bother where you were concerned, Mr. Lawless, you know?"

So that blinking Vanley affair had influenced even the girl. The gov'nor looked at Lawless and smiled.

"What is the Vanley affair?" he asked, when we were all on the second floor, walking down the corridor.

"Oh, I made a bit of a fool of myself," Lawless said. "I'll tell you all about it at dinner."

It didn't take us long to change, and presently we were all trooping into the dining-room.

I allowed the gov'nor and Lawless to go ahead, and followed them. We had a special table up in one corner of the room, and as we walked towards it I noticed that Blenkers had changed his place that evening. He had found a table next to ours, and Vanley was sitting with him.

I admit that I stared rather hard at Blenkers, but he did not seem to notice me. His eyes were fixed on Blake all the time; and at last, when the gov'nor was just passing the table, I saw Blenkers do a very queer thing.

He pretended to drop his napkin, and he knocked over Vanley's glass. The crook had not raised his eyes from his soup-plate—he was a bit of a food-hog in his way—but that crash made him lift his head, and he saw the gov'nor not two feet away from him.

If ever holy terror leapt into a man's face for a moment it did with Vanley just then. The gov'nor came to a halt, and looked at

the scarred, ugly features for a second; then Vanley seemed to find his voice.

"How do you do, Mr. Blake?" he said, hurriedly. "Perhaps you do not remember my name—James Vanley?"

I was very close to the gov'nor now, and I saw the look in his eyes. They were as hard as flints, and there are very few people can meet them when they look like that.

"No, I did not remember your name, Mr. Vanley," said the gov'nor, and, with a nod, he passed on and took his seat at our table. I ventured a glance at Blenkers, but he was looking down into his soup plate with a very innocent expression on his long features.

"Now, what the blazes did that mean?" I thought.

I knew that Blenkers had brought about that accident deliberately, so that Vanley might look up just as the gov'nor passed. Why had the American done that?"

I often find that one discovery seems to link up with another; and, like a flash, another idea came to me.

Was it Blenkers who had sent that message?

So far as I knew, there were only two men in the hotel who knew anything about me, and that was Lawless and Blenkers. They both knew the number of my room; but I was certain that Lawless had not sent that wire. Then again, Blenkers had proved to me that he knew who I was and what my gov'nor was. And when I recalled that little conversation that we had, when I mentioned that the gov'nor was in Paris, it seemed to me that I had been a chuckle-headed ass, not to have suspected Blenkers from the very start.

We were too close to Blenkers and the crook to talk much about them in the dining-room, so I kept my discoveries to myself. But as soon as the meal was over I saw Vanley get up and leave the table, and Blenkers followed him after a while.

"Look here, gov'nor," I broke out then, "I've solved the riddle. The man who sent you that wire was Blenkers."

"And who is Blenkers?" asked Blake.

"The chap with the prison-crop, who was sitting with Vanley," Lawless put in. "Tinker and I have been mixed up with him ever since we arrived here."

Lawless told the gov'nor the whole story then, and it seemed to interest him no end.

"I've been looking at Blenkers," he admitted. "He is too conspicuous to be missed. It is a queer sort of idea, that of his, to make himself look like a gaol-bird—even to the rough hands."

He was smoking a cigar, and there was a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Yes, this is certainly interesting," he said, half to himself. "There is a very pretty problem here."

Now that just suited me to hear the gov'nor say that, for I'd been cudgelling my brains about Blenkers until they fairly ached.

"How does he strike you, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Who—Blenkers?"

"Yes."

The gov'nor looked at me for a moment.

"Blenkers strikes me as being a very clever man—a man who has set himself some grim task—and who is quite capable of carrying it through," he returned. "He is no fool, Tinker."

"That is what I thought," said Lawless: "but he rather proved the opposite this morning, don't you think?"

"I wonder? There may be a doubt about it, Lawless. Perhaps Blenkers wants Vanley to trust him, and what happened this morning would certainly make that crook do that."

"You know Vanley, then?"

My gov'nor leaned forward.

"I do, and I wonder that Tinker has forgotten him, although, after all, young 'un, you only saw him once. Don't you remember going to Liverpool just over three years ago and watching the departure of a Mr. Samuel Tagdell—"

"It all came back to me like a flash.

"The Gorrings Museum murder case," I gasped.

Blake nodded.

"That is what I refer to," he said. "Of course, you did nothing in the affair beyond following Tagdell—or Vanley, as he now calls himself—from London to Liverpool, and watched him go on board the *Armetico*. And that was really the end of the case, so far as we were concerned."

"I know nothing about it," Lawless said. "You might give me the details, Blake."

The gov'nor obliged.

The Gorrings Museum murder had made a big sensation when it happened. The old curator had been found lying dead in his room, bound and gagged, and the little jewel-room of the private museum had been ransacked by thieves. There was over twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels stolen, and they had never been traced.

The gov'nor's connection with the case was brought about by the Sticla Insurance Company, who had covered the jewels, asking him to take it up on their behalf. I was working on another case at the time, and did not know the full details myself, until the gov'nor mentioned them now.

"I suspected this man, Vanley," the gov'nor said. "I discovered that he had visited the museum several times—it is one of the show places of Kensington, you know—and I knew his reputation for tackling big stuff. But he is a very clever rascal, and he was staying at the Berkeley in a very open way, passing himself off as a wealthy American, whose hobby was the study of public institutions. I saw him in the hotel, and questioned him pretty closely. He had alibis to prove that he had not been anywhere near Kensington on that night. Indeed, he could account for every hour of his time, both on the day before the murder and the day after. I saw that he had deliberately arranged to be always in the company of some absolutely trustworthy witness."

The gov'nor smiled drily.

"On the night of the robbery, in fact, he had gone with Superintendent Baroe of the City Police, to Limehouse, to see a Chinese opium-joint. That was a cute move, for he

had actually a police witness—although the police knew that he was a crook."

"He tapped on the table for a moment.

"Anyhow, to cut a long story short, three men were arrested by the police, and two of them admitted being mixed in the affair. The third man protested his innocence; but the other two swore he was with them, and that he was the man who had tied up the old curator, and had gone off with the swag."

The gov'nor looked at Lawless.

"I did not attend the trial," he went on. "The insurance company accepted the police version of the crime, and that left me out of the count. It was touch and go with the third man whether he would hang, or not, but the medical evidence was a bit conflicting, and the three prisoners were very ably defended. It was finally decided that the curator had died of heart-failure, and I think myself that that was correct. So the charge was turned into manslaughter, and the third man—named, I remember, Otway—was sentenced to penal servitude for life."

"What became of the other two?"

"They each got four years, I believe," said Blake. "The fact that they had turned King's evidence was taken into account. But the jewels were never found, and have not turned up, to my knowledge, to this day. I know that the insurance company had to fork out the whole sum."

He smiled grimly.

"And I think still that my theory was correct," he ended. "It was Tagdell—or Vanley, as we will call him if you like—who arranged that affair. He was the man in the background, and they never gave me time to bring him out into the light."

Lawless and I sat still for a long moment, digesting that bit of ancient history.

"And here he is back again in England, perhaps ready to pull off another haul," Lawless commented.

Blake arose to his feet.

"That is very likely," he admitted. "Men of the Vanley type never alter their habits. Crime is in their blood, and the more successful they are the deeper do they descend."

"And yet that silly ass Blenkens was indignant because I called the skunk a common hotel-bribe! Why, it was a compliment!" Lawless said, with a half-laugh.

"I don't know enough about Blenkens to form a complete opinion about him yet," said the governor. "But I shouldn't put him down as an ass. I think that he has taken Vanley's measure, and may even be out to make use of him—in his own way."

He nodded to me.

"If you think that Blenkens sent me that wire, that ought to give us a clue," he added. "For Blenkens, by some means or other, must have known that I knew Vanley, and that Vanley knew me. And the fact that he shifted his table to-night, and worked that trick that you saw, Tinker, rather makes me inclined to think that Blenkens wanted to frighten Vanley by making me turn up here to-night."

That seemed a very reasonable suggestion, so far as it went.

"But what the deuce is behind it?" Law-

less persisted. "What does Blenkens want to scare Vanley for?"

The gov'nor began to saunter away from the table.

"That is what it might be worth our while to discover," he returned drily. "It is certainly a pretty problem."

He looked at me and smiled.

"In fact, it is Tinker's usual husman's holiday," he said. "He has started up a first-class mystery, and we'll have to hunt it to its end."

Of course, I knew that I'd be blamed for it.

About eleven o'clock, while the gov'nor and Lawless were still playing billiards, I went out for a last stroll before turning in. Someone came out from the big yard behind the hotel, and I saw Sam's black face under the lamp.

"Hallo, Sam!" I cried.

Sam was living at a small hotel close by—he never would live in the swagger places if he could help it, although Lawless and I were ready enough to fix him up, for Sam is one of the best—and I thought he was just going back home.

"Dat's fine," he said. "I was jest coming round to try and see you; Mr. Tinker, so I was."

He was breathing rather heavily, and seemed a bit upset.

"What's wrong, Sam?" I asked.

The black fellow pointed towards the row of garages.

"I was jest looking at de car for the last time, and seeing dat it was ready for tomorrow morning, when one of dem white-shirted gen'lemen came in from the hotel," said Sam. "He spoke to me, and gave me a cigar."

"That doesn't sound very insulting, Sam."

"Dat cigar was jest bait!" said Sam, rolling his eyes indignantly. "He started off then to fire a lot ob questions at me, so he did. Wanted to know who the haas was, and who you were, and what you were doing down here."

He snorted indignantly.

"I guess he took me for a fool," he went on. "But I'm not so soft as I look. I tol' him a pack ob lies, and I saw dat he knew dey was lies, but he didn't let on. Then he got talking about Mr. Blake, and I tol' him dat Mr. Blake was in Paris, and—and he called me a liar!"

Sam nodded his hullet head solemnly.

"And said I was a liar, and dat de truf wasn't in me," he repeated. "And, mind you, Mr. Tinker, dat was the only time that I really tol' the truf, as you know."

"I was not going to enlighten Sam just then, so I let him go on.

"He told me then dat you were all spies and dirty detectives, and dat Mr. Blake was in the hotel, and if he was looking for trouble he'd get it, good and quick."

"What happened then?"

Sam halted, then a wide grin crossed his face.

"I had a squirt full of grease in my hand," he said, "and when he called me a liar again—because I told him for de second time dat there was no Mr. Blake that we knew in the

hotel—I just gave him the whole lot ober his shirt!"

He went off in a roar of laughter then, and I had to join him. But I wanted to make sure of the identity of the man who had received that baptism, and I described Blenkera, but Sam shook his head.

"No; nothing like him," he said. "The man who came to see me looked a tough. He'd a big scar down his cheek, and I guess he's de sort ob man that could bring out four acres from his sleeve without turning a hair."

So it was Vanley who had been making these close personal inquiries about my guv'nor and us.

He had also been breathing threats evidently, and when a crook does that it means that he is really trying to keep his own courage up.

I walked with Sam a bit of the way, and then turned back for the hotel.

It was in a rather lonely part of the road, and there were no lights along the side of it. I was keeping rather close to the hedge, and I almost fell over the handle-bars of a bike that was tucked up under the hedge.

I had barked my shine rather badly and was not very pleased. I examined the bike, and found that it was one of those light two-h.p. motor ones, the sort that a fellow can wheel easily enough, or even ride without using the power, when he wants to.

It is not usual to find a brand-new bike left derelict in a hedge, and I thought of collaring the thing and handing it over to the police. But as I stood looking at it I chanced to look up the road, and I saw a lean, tall figure come sprinting down towards me. It was dark, but I could not mistake that loosely-built body.

It was Blenkera—Blenkera in a hurry. Something told me to butt into the hedge there and then, and I was through in the field before he knew what had happened. He grabbed the bike, wheeled it into the middle of the road, then switched on the lights, and in another moment he was off at full speed. I saw him turn the bike into the road that heads straight up over the downs, and I watched the glare of his small headlamp until it had vanished.

The speed that he was going at hinted there was some important business afoot.

I only wish I could have followed him then.

It would have saved a lot of trouble, and would have explained everything.

CHAPTER 3.

Vanley Tries a Scoundrelly Trick, and Blenkera Intervenes Again—A Stern Chase and a Failure—The Guv'nor Leaves Us in the Lurch.

IT seemed to me that the guv'nor was really glad to have got away from that speech-making in Paris, for when we met at the breakfast-table next morning he was in a very good humour. I noticed that Blenkera and Vanley had shifted their tables again, and were at the other side of the room. I thought Vanley looked particularly

bad-tempered that morning, and I did not wonder at that. Sam's grease-gun must have been a nasty sort of weapon to fure at close quarters.

Blenkera looked fagged out, and after breakfast I found him sitting under the verandah in a big deck-chair. He nodded to me, and drew another chair up to his, indicating that it was ready for me.

I thought that rather cool on his part, considering all that had happened, but I sat down all the same. Somehow or other I liked Blenkera, even although I disliked the company he kept.

Lawless had gone off to write a letter—he never forgets to write every week to his mother, and neither would I if I had a mother like his. The governor felt rather energetic, and told me he was going for a stroll to a place called The Glades. Everybody who has been at Searach knows The Glades. It is just a wide stretch of sloping cliff covered with trees and zigzag paths. The town council of Searach have been wise enough not to attempt to "improve" it, and the result is a very beautiful little wild place, where you can find a quiet seat and look right out to sea, without being pestered by nigger-minstrels and old whiskey asses wanting to take your photograph.

I told the guv'nor that I would follow him later on. There is a restaurant—a sort of chalet—in The Glades, where you can get decent grub, and we had arranged to meet there about one o'clock.

Blenkera began to talk to me as though nothing had happened. I could not help admiring his nerve. I had always liked him, and when he tried he could be very amusing. He had a sort of dry way of talking about some of the people in the hotel that would have made anyone laugh.

I thought it best not to mention anything about what had occurred, and he did not seem anxious to bring the matter up.

"I'm going away for a few days," he said presently. "I've got an idea that a little yachting cruise wouldn't hurt me."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He pointed out to the south.

"They tell me that there is rather a dinky sort of island out there; it is called Dobben Isle. There is an old ruined castle on it and the remains of a village. We don't have ruined castles in the States, and I guess I'd like to wander into one and see what it is like."

I had a foggy notion that Dobben was rather a long distance away from Searach, and I said so.

"We can do it in a day and a half," Blenkera returned. "I've chartered a ten-tonner, and I'm pretty good at aiming with a compass and a chart."

"Are you going alone?"

I thought that his eyes rather glistened for a moment.

"No-o. I'm taking my friend with me," he said.

I did not ask who the friend was, and he did not mention the name.

"It is a long trip to take just to see a castle," I said. "I could find you one in half the time."

Blenkers grinned. "It wouldn't be the sort I want," he returned. "My castle has to be really deserted, and I don't want to see one that has 'J. Jones' and 'Tom Smith' scratched on its moss-grown walls. Your people are very like mine, Tinker. We are never satisfied until we have carved our initials on the forehead of Ramones, just to show we don't care a darn for anyone!"

He talked about the trip for a while. He was taking a good store of grub, and, from what I could hear of it, he and Vanley were going to work the yacht themselves.

"I hope to get back by Wednesday or Thursday," he said. "In fact, I must be back by Thursday, for my friend has an appointment that he's got to keep."

I did not quite see how this interested me, but he gave me more details.

"An appointment fixed for next Saturday at a place called Mellon's Mill," he went on. "It is about ten miles from Seareach, across the moors. There is a junction there, and the place that my friend is going to is an old farmhouse; Discombe Farm it is called."

Now I am not always too wooden-headed, and it suddenly dawned on me that Blenkers was not firing off all this stuff just for the sake of finding something to say. There was a lot about this man that puzzled me, but I reckoned that he never wasted his time. There was some scheme at the back of that long head of his, and he was artfully letting me have a few points about it.

That was why I decided to remember the names, "Mellon's Mill," and "Discombe Farm."

But I never guessed what they were to mean to me in the very near future.

"I'd like to fix up another round of golf with you for next Thursday, Tinker," he said, after another pause.

"Can't be done," I returned. "We will all be going back to London by to-morrow or Tuesday, at the very latest."

He did not seem to like that news a bit. In fact, it rather took him out of that cold reserve of his, for he looked at me sharply.

"But I thought that you were down here for a holiday?" he said.

"Only a week-end, Mr. Blenkers," I returned.

He rubbed that long chin with its ginger bristles for a moment.

"Will Mr. Blake be going back with you?"

"Bound to. There is nothing to keep him at Seareach, and we've got our work to do, you know."

"But he isn't on any case now, is he?"

"Not that I know of," I answered. "But I'll bet there are a small crop of posers waiting for us when we get back."

"Humph! Why don't you let them wait?" I laughed.

"Because there's nothing to keep us interested here," I said.

He looked at me hard.

"Nothing to keep you interested—eh? Well, I wonder!"

I had a half-notion that he might get really confidential, but there was nothing

doing. I had noticed one or two things about him, though, that interested me.

There were several spots of oil on the bottom of his trousers, and he had not quite got rid of the tang of petrol from his hands. I wondered where he had gone to on that bike. It struck me that it must have been a fairly long journey, for he looked tired, and he hadn't changed his clothes, so that might mean that he had been away all night. And, as a matter of fact, his face rather suggested that he had had no sleep, although his eyes were bright enough.

I had been keeping a look-out for Vanley, but he did not turn up, so, about noon, I got up from the chair and rodded to Blenkers.

"I must be off now," I said.

"Where are you going?"

"To The Glades," I returned. "I've promised to meet Mr. Blake there—at the restaurant."

Blenkers could control his features better than most men, but I saw a quick shadow cross his brow.

"The Glades—eh? Mr. Blake went there this morning, did he?"

He seemed to ask that question in a rather extraordinary tone.

"He wanted to walk before lunch," I replied.

The lean figure stood up.

"Well, I'd—I'd hurry along and find him, if I were you," he said, and anyone would have noticed the anxious note in his voice.

"The Glades are usually empty on a morning like this—not many people about, you know. You might not be able to find him very easily. It is a lonesome spot."

He nodded to me.

"Yes, I'd get along—at once," he added.

"It is a pity that you did not mention that you had an appointment there with Mr. Blake earlier. We need not have talked so long."

He swung off then, and I went out of the hotel and turned along the road for The Glades. I will admit that I felt rather curious, but I had no idea what Blenkers was driving at.

"Why shouldn't the gov'nor go to The Glades if he wants to?" I thought.

It was over a mile to the entrance to The Glades, and I did not meet a single soul on the way out. Blenkers was quite right about the place being deserted in the morning. It is rather a long stretch from Seareach, and most of the visitors prefer to do The Glades in the afternoon when the sun is not quite so hot. I found myself walking through the tall pine trees along one of the narrow paths, and it was very cool and shady and quiet. You can lose yourself quite easily in The Glades. There are about two hundred paths, and all of them lead to nowhere in particular. Now and again you come across a little summer-house, or maybe you land on a bare stretch of turf on which a seat has been placed. There are parts where you can look over a sheer drop on to another path over a hundred feet below. It is very restful and cool in there, but it is very lonely.

Whether it was Blenkers's way of urging

me to go and find the gov'nor, or perhaps the influence of these tall, lanky pines, I do not know, but suddenly I got the wind up properly. I felt that the gov'nor was in danger. Everybody gets those premonitions now and again, and this one was extra strong. In fact, it took such a hold of me that presently I found myself running—yes, running along the blinking paths as though there was something ahead of me, that I wanted to get at and tackle.

I shot down a sloping path, and found myself in a little dell overgrown with tall ferns. The path came to a halt at that dell, but I was not paying much attention to paths, and I went on, and began to slip down a rough, bouldery bit of ground like the roof of a house. I fetched up sharp on a rocky ledge, and only did it in the nick of time, for I saw that the ground fell sheer beyond the ledge, and the path was a good thirty feet below it. I had dropped on my hands and knees to check myself, and I was just going to turn and claw my way back, when I chanced to look down to the path below. It must have been a movement that really caught my eye and fixed my gaze. I saw a hush open, and out of it crept two men—Vanley, and a big, hulking fellow in a motor-cyclist's overalls.

Vanley was never a beauty to look at, but the man with him was just about the most hangdog ruffian I had ever clapped eyes on. The way that they crept from the hush was enough to make me drop flat and watch them through a patch of fern.

I saw then that they were on one of the main pathways through the glade. About a hundred yards up to the right a motor-bicycle was standing resting against a tree, and I thought I recognised the bike! I had had a good look at the one that Blenkins had gone off on, and after another glance I knew that I wasn't mistaken. The bike against the tree was the same one as I had found in the hedge.

That was interesting enough, but I hadn't time to study it out. For Vanley and the huge ruffian came down the road, searching each side of it, until the former found what he was searching for—a great chunk of rock, embedded in the side of the cliff, just under where I lay.

Vanley and his companion tagged at the rock until they got it free; then, carrying it between them, they went back to the bush. They kept well away from the edge of the path, and moved quietly, looking to right and left at every few paces.

I was rather chuckle-headed then, for I did not tumble to their game at once.

It was not until the two rascals stepped into the hush with their burden that an idea of what it all meant came to me.

That hush grew on the edge of another steep slope, and I guessed that there was another path below. I saw Vanley help his companion to raise the rocky fragment; I could see them straining at it through the hush. Then, like a flash, the truth came to me.

They were going to hurl that heavy rock at someone or something below the hush.

I reckon I did the best I could then.

I simply leaped to my feet, and let a twenty-horse-power yell out.

"Hi! Below—below there!"

As I yelled the rock shot forward—I should think that the yell and the heave happened exactly together. I heard the heavy thing go crashing down the slope. Then I flung myself out to the edge of the ledge, and swung over.

Vanley and the other rascal came breaking through the bush, and the volley of oaths that they let drive hinted that my shout had either disturbed their aim or warned their victim in time.

I was hanging on to the ledge, kicking out with my feet to try and find a hold, so that I might get down to the skunks, though what good that would have done I fall to see now. I suppose I was just about red with anger, and a fellow doesn't always stop to think at such times. But that blinking patch of cliff was as bare as the back of my hand; and while I was still kicking I heard the crackle of the bike-engine, and looked round to the right.

The big fellow was on his saddle, and Vanley was sitting on the position seat behind, and they were coming down that path towards me at full tilt.

I saw Vanley raise his hand, and I knew what it was that glinted between his fingers. His other arm was wrapped round the beefy rascal, and he was waiting till he could get close before he fired.

It was a nice sort of position for me. I was hanging above a thirty-foot drop, splayed out like an old cat on a barn-door, and Vanley couldn't miss me if he tried.

I don't know whether I lost my head or not, but I do know that I simply hung there like a ripe peach, waiting for that skunk to plug a bullet into me and knock me off my stem!

But it never happened.

Vanley was wanting to make very sure of me, and he hung on just a second or so too long. His left hand, holding the revolver, was outstretched as the bike came rushing down the path, and just when I was wondering which particular part of my carcase he was aiming for, I heard, above the rattle of the motor-bike, a sharp report!

I thought that it was Vanley who had fired, and as I didn't feel any dull shock I reckoned he had missed badly, and I became aware that someone was bowling out a string of oaths underneath me, and I glanced over my shoulder again. The bike was just passing me, and Vanley, leaning on the back of the other man, was trailing his left arm by his side in a way that could not be mistaken, while in the path lay his revolver.

That settled it. I was not going to hang there another minute; so I let go, and down I came at a run, rubbing my shins and elbows on that rough, uneven surface, until I fetched up in a heap on the path. I know how to land lightly, and I didn't do much more than jar myself for about an instant. When I got on my feet there was the gov'nor, standing not a yard away from me,

emptying a spent cartridge out of his revolver.

He did not have to tell me what had happened then. I think we both stood and grinned at each other for a second; then the gov'nor pointed down the path.

"I let them go," he said slowly. "I don't suppose you wanted me to stop them, did you?"

I was not quite sure about that. They were both would-be murderers, and had asked for all they could get. The gov'nor picked up Vanley's weapon and pocketed it.

"What I want to know is why you hung on there like a hottle on a string, waiting to be plugged?" he went on.

I shook my head. I really could not say why I had done it.

"It seemed a long way to drop, gov'nor," I said feebly.

"You managed it all right, though," he returned. "Still, I'm not going to rag you, young 'un. I suppose you know that you saved my life?"

I did not know anything of the kind, and explained. We walked up to the hush and went through it.

"Look!" said the gov'nor.

That whacking great rock had landed plumb on a wooden chair, smashing it to fragments.

"I was sitting on the chair when you yelled," the gov'nor said. "I did not stop to look round or inquire, but just flung myself clear to the right. It was as close a call as I want, young 'un."

He had climbed the slope and had twigg'd the pretty position I was in, and had taken a pot-shot at Vanley's arm. The gov'nor's pot-shots are about the most deadly of their kind.

Of course, by this time the hike and the two rascals had absolutely vanished, and the silent Glades seemed to be denying that such thrilling things had ever happened in them.

"I vote we go back to the hotel and have the skunk locked up," I said. "I don't think that Blenkers will be able to stand for him this time."

The gov'nor grinned.

"Don't you," he returned. "Well, we will see. But there is no hurry, young 'un. I'm going to have lunch at that restaurant first. We must not let a little affair like this upset our plans."

But I could not take in that easy way. I was boiling mad with Vanley, and wanted to get a bit of my own hack. The heggar had meant to drill a hole in me, and would have done it, too, had it not been for the gov'nor's quick aim.

"I don't want any lunch, gov'nor," I said. "I'm going to get right back to Searach and have that beggar taken into custody. They both tried to murder you."

Biske shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, young 'un," he said. "I'm not going to try to prevent you. I know that it is not much good. I'll probably get back to the hotel about three o'clock."

We parted then, and I set off at a quick pace down the path, while the gov'nor went on up the Glades towards the chalet-restaurant. It was the lower road that I

came out on, and I had to climb the cliff by way of the old coastguard road. I was about fifty yards from the top when I heard the rapid beat of a cycle-engine, and I was familiar enough with that particular engine to recognise it at once. I saw the dust rising above the higher ground, and I started to run up the last few yards of the road; but, of course, the bike had the better of me, and by the time I reached the top road it was a good five hundred yards ahead, and bowling along in a great cloud of dust.

I had only just time to see two figures on it, and I recognised the long, grey dust-coat that Vanley had been wearing. He was squatting now on the postillion-seat, and the bike was fairly flying along the road—away from Searach.

It went swerving round a bend, and I caught sight of it again just as it topped another rise; then it vanished, and I think I shook my fist at it.

I realised that the blighters had got the better of me. They were streaking away from Searach as fast as a motor-cycle could take them, and there was no telling where they might get to. It dawned on me that it was rather strange that they should have doubled on their tracks so quickly, for when they left the Glades they were heading for Searach. But it wasn't much good my puzzling my brain over their sudden change of plan, so I turned and walked down the upper road, heading for the Imperial. It was only about half a mile away, and I did not feel inclined to go back to the gov'nor and let him know how these two skunks had hested me.

Lunch was just being served when I got to the hotel, and I found the lean American in the hall. He came up to me with a friendly smile and asked me to join him for lunch.

Now just at that moment I wasn't feeling particularly friendly with Blenkers, but I thought that I might be able to get some information from him, so I accepted the invitation.

Lawless wasn't in the dining-room, and Blenkers and I had a table to ourselves.

I waited for a bit, expecting him to start the conversation round in the right channel, but he simply kept up his usual chaffing stuff about the people all round us, so at last I lost my patience with him and halted in.

"Look here, Mr. Blenkers," I said, "I want to know why you were so very anxious about my gov'nor this morning?"

He gave me that queer look of his.

"Anxious, Tinker?" he said. "What do you mean?"

I leaned forward.

"Were you aware that Vanley was going to the Glades this morning and that there might be trouble if he met the gov'nor?"

Blenkers did not even flutter an eyelid.

"Mr. Vanley could not have been in the Glades this morning," he said very slowly. "I happen to know that."

I was not going to lose my temper if I could help it, but this cool reply rather took my breath away.

"This is getting a bit too hot," I returned. "I tell you that I saw him with my own eyes—and he wasn't up to any good, either."

"I'm afraid you are making a mistake, my dear Tinker," Blenkers said.

"Oh, am I? Well, we will see about that," I returned, feeling my dander rise. "I want to tell you that Vanley and another beefy brute did their best to kill the gov'nor; and Vanley was also out to do me a bit of no good, but it didn't come off."

The lean man opposite me shook his head in a sad way.

"You seem to be Vanley-mad, Tinker," he said slowly. "This is a very serious charge to make, and, of course, you will have plenty of evidence."

"Oh, I've got evidence enough," I returned. "Vanley and his friend were on a motor-bike, and someone must have seen them. I managed to read the registered number of the bike, and we'll be able to trace them by it."

Blenkers leaned forward,

"Was the registered number WX 5304?"

I grinned.

"You've got it," I said. "They came down this road; then, for some reason or other, turned back again. But I'll be able to trace them all right."

"Now that is extraordinary," said Blenkers. "For, as a matter of fact, I was riding that bike this morning. I hired it from a local garage several days ago. After you left me I thought I would go for a spin down the road, and I did."

I looked at him and grinned.

"Nothing doing, Mr. Blenkers," I said. "You cannot pull that stuff on me. I saw Vanley and his beefy friend streak out of the Glades, by the lower road, like lightning on that bike, and you weren't figuring in the plan at all."

But his eyes never wavered.

"I only went for a very short spin," he continued. He was talking very slowly, so that I would not miss any point of his yarn. "For I happened to know that a couple of men from the hotel wanted to get to Crowdsdale to-day, and they couldn't hire a conveyance, and were going to walk. So I returned and met them, and I loaned them the bike."

His long face was as serious as a judge's.

"You didn't happen to meet them on the top road, did you, Tinker?" he queried. "One of them borrowed a long dust-coat that I was wearing?"

I simply lay back in the chair and stared at the beggar.

I could see how he had hamboozled me.

He must have gone down to that lower road, stopped Vanley and the hulking skunk with him, made them hand over the bike, and while they made off along the beach, Blenkers had ridden the bike up the lower road and waylaid the two men whom he knew were going to foot it to Crowdsdale. Of course, they had jumped at the chance of borrowing the bike, and Blenkers had handed over the dust-coat—no doubt he had made Vanley take it off—and so it was two innocent men that I had seen disappearing in that cloud of dust!

"If you want to collar these two chaps you can telephone to Crowdsdale, Tinker,"

Blenkers ended up. "But I should be very careful, if I were you."

Then, for the first time, a twinkle came into his eye.

"There has been a lot of arresting and locking-up going on," he murmured, in that far-off voice of his. "I reckon that the police would get sort of fed-up with the game."

I just looked at him, speechless. He had worked up a very tricky alibi for Vanley and that other fellow; and, of course, they would see to it that the scheme worked.

"Then where is Vanley?" I asked, at last.

He pointed out of the window.

"He is on board the Swallow," he said. "He went on board very early this morning. She is lying off the beach just below the cliff-road."

I think I must have glared at him. Of course, it had been very easy for Vanley to slip across the beach, get into his boat and pull out for the ten-tonner while I was plodding up that blinking road. I had never thought of looking seaward for the rascals—motor-bikes are not seaplanes!

"Blenkers," said I, "you are the limit! You are firing off as daisy a piece of bunkum as ever sounded like fact."

I arose to my feet and gave him a bow.

"I'm very much obliged to you," I went on. "I know that I'd have gone to the police and asked them to arrest two men on that bike, and that would have meant more trouble for me."

He did not say anything in reply to that, but a half-grin lifted the corners of his firm lips.

"So you saved me from making a fool of myself, but you've also proved to me that you are a wrong-'un, Mr. Blenkers," I added. "You are joining hands with a known crook, and you've hacked him up twice in positions that any honest man would have known were false ones."

I moved away from the table.

"I think that from now you and I had better cut out the friendly stunt," I said. "There isn't room for it in our business. My job is finding crooks and laying them by the heels—not standing in with them. Good-afternoon!"

I was rather proud of that speech at the time. It struck me as being what the newspapers called "dignified protest."

Of course, I was a fool, but I didn't know that at the time.

I didn't see Blenkers again that day, but I had another proof that he must have been very busy. About four o'clock the gov'nor and Lawless walked up to me while I was sitting on the verandah. I had wondered what had happened to old Lawless, and was rather surprised to see him with the gov'nor.

"Here is the young 'un," Blake said. "You can ask him yourself, if you like; but I think you will find that I am correct."

They drew chairs forward, and we formed a little group. Lawless nodded to me.

"Did you send a boy from the hotel to tell Sam to look for me and ask me to go up to the chalet. In the Glades—urgently?"

I think I smothered a groan.

"Another mystery?" I returned. "There

A CONVICT BY PROXY.

was no message sent by me. You said that you wouldn't go for a walk, in the first place, didn't you?"

The gov'nor smiled at Lawless.

"I told you so," he said quietly.

"But what was the object?" Lawless said. "I didn't meet with any startling adventure on the road."

"You weren't meant to," said the gov'nor.

"Then why send the message?"

The gov'nor nodded to me.

"Perhaps the young 'un can explain?" he said.

I could explain, and I did. I told them all about the motor-bike trick, and how Blenkers had worked his scheme. It seemed to me that the gov'nor found it rather amusing, although I could not see any sort of joke in it—not by a long chalk.

"That fellow is clever," said the gov'nor.

Lawless shrugged his shoulders.

"A bit too clever," he chimed in.

"He's doing what he likes with us," was my suggestion.

"He was out to save Vanley and the other man, and he did it very skilfully," the gov'nor went on, in a musing voice. "The only man he was afraid of was Lawless. There was always a chance of Lawless tumbling across him when he was working off that motor-cycle dodge, and he got rid of him by sending him up to the Chalet."

He was silent for a moment.

"But I don't think that the Blenkers had anything to do with our affair this morning," he added. "The point is that he sent the young 'un off at once as soon as he heard that I was in the Glades. What I think is that Blenkers knew that Vanley was going to meet someone in there this morning, and when he heard that I was going there he was afraid of what might happen, and sent Tinker off to try to prevent it, which, by the way, Tinker did."

"That sounds reasonable," said Lawless.

"But there is one big flaw in it. Why should a chap like Blenkers have anything to do with a crook—a crook whom he knows is quite capable of trying to murder a man?"

"We get back to the original problem, then, my dear chap," the gov'nor returned. "And that is what makes the affair so interesting from a psychological point. I am sure that Blenkers is trying to do two things—run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. He doesn't want Vanley to be caught—and yet he obviously went out of his way to warn Tinker this morning."

I saw the force of that. Blenkers had certainly been very anxious to get me to start and look for the gov'nor at once that morning. He couldn't have known what was going to happen, but it looked as though he was afraid that Blake might be in danger. And he had not been far wrong.

"Vanley recognised me, and has got frightened over something," the gov'nor ended. "My opinion is that Blenkers knows a great deal more about Vanley than the latter is aware of. But this yachting-trip strikes me as being the more interesting news. Tinker. Just let me have a few more details, if you will, young 'un!"

I repeated every word that Blenkers had said, and the governor listened very attentively.

"He was very accurate about the dates," he said. "I wonder why it should be so very important that he must get back by next Thursday. A man on a long holiday does not usually tie himself down."

He seemed to harp on that theme.

"I must find out what happens on Thursday to make it such an important date," he said later on.

Neither Vanley nor Blenkers showed up at dinner that evening, and we did not see them in the hotel that night. The gov'nor made inquiries, and found that Vanley had collected some of his kit early in the morning, and had gone down to the "Swallow" with it. So that looked as though he did not mean to return until after the trip to the island was finished.

Next morning Lawless and I had another shock. When we came down to breakfast we found the gov'nor talking to a bald-headed gentleman, whom he introduced to us as the managing-director of a big insurance company. They were talking business, so we left them to it, and presently, when the waiter had gone, the gov'nor came across to me.

"Do you know what that man was after?" he asked.

"A case, I suppose?" said I.

"Yes, but an odd one. He is head of the company that had insured the jewels that were stolen from the Gorrings Museum," the gov'nor said. "He told me a very curious story!"

"What was it?"

"He received a letter by the first post this morning telling him that there was a chance of his company recovering possession of the jewels and having the money refunded, if he wired to the Imperial Hotel, Searceach, and asked Mr. Sexton Blake to take up the case again!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Lawless. "That was the case you told us about—the one that you thought Vanley was mixed up with."

The gov'nor nodded.

"Exactly," he returned. "The letter also added that it would be advisable to ask Mr. Blake to remain in the Imperial Hotel for at least another week, as the developments would take place there."

"Now, who the blazes—"

Blake shook his head.

"The letter was written in a faked hand, and was not signed," he said. "It was posted at Searceach yesterday afternoon. Mr. Cumberland came down here as soon as he got the letter. He had no idea that I was here, and was surprised when we met in the hall."

I saw the gov'nor smile grimly.

"But, in any case, we have arranged matters," he went on. "I am going to take up the case once more. And I managed to get one interesting item of information from him. It appears that one of the men who received the lighter sentence is due to leave prison this week, and the prison he is in is that big one on the moors, ten miles from

here. The nearest railway-station to the prison is a place called Mellon's Mill!" I jumped at that.

"When do you say that this chap is due to be released, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Probably Saturday," said the gov'nor. "That was the very day that Blenkers mentioned," I said.

"Yes; I remembered that." It seemed to me that the real issues in the case were hesitating at last to reveal themselves through a mist of tangled happenings.

"We are waking up some sort of game," said Lawless, "but I'm hanged if I can see anything to shoot at yet."

The gov'nor chuckled. "We were all in the same position, Lawless," he said. "But I think that it is interesting enough to justify us hanging on. What do you say?"

"I came down here for golf," said Lawless, "but if there is anything more exciting to develop, you can count me in."

"Good! Then we'll just fix up things now, and we'll book our rooms for another week."

We had to do that, for the Imperial was crowded, and, in fact, the manager had already let my room to someone for the Tuesday.

"Mr. Blenkers went off this morning, and said that he might not be back until Thursday or Friday. Of course he is paying for his suite, but perhaps he would not mind your using one of the rooms until I could fix you up."

That idea seemed to please the gov'nor, and the result was that I found myself transferred to the second bedroom of the suite, the one that Vanley had occupied. It was rather quaint to find myself occupying the bedroom of a skunk who had tried to plug me; but Vanley had made a very clean sweep of his belongings, and I could not find anything of his there.

In the afternoon the gov'nor slipped away, and Lawless and I had a stroll along the cliff road to try and locate the Swallow. But she had left her moorings beside the beach, and although we searched right along from end to end we could not find her.

It was evident that she had sailed off either on the previous night or early that morning.

"I'd give something to be on board that little hooker," Lawless admitted to me. "There is some queer business afoot, Tinker, and we have only just got on the fringe of it."

We went back to the hotel, and Lawless got his Sunbeam out. We thought of doing a round on the links, but, as luck would have it, we never reached them, for while passing through the town I saw a man on a motor-bike come out of a garage and wheel into the road in front of us.

This time there was no room for any error. It was the hulking brute who had ridden the bike on the previous morning.

I gave the word to Lawless, and we followed the bike out of the town, just keeping it in sight until we were clear of the houses. It turned up the hill that leads to the moors, and Lawless let his Sunbeam out, and we began to draw down on the fellow.

We were only about fifty yards behind him when we reached the head of the hill; but he chanced to look round, and I think it was only then that he spotted me. I saw his ugly face change, then he turned and leaped over his hike, letting her have full throttle.

"Don't let the beggar get away," I cried.

That was the beginning of as tough a chase as ever we had. A motor-hike of a good make has the beating of most cars. These little beggars can do their sixty on a good road, and they climb like the wind. But a Sunbeam wants a lot of holding, and Lawless was master of his car.

It was a good job for us that we were out on the moors, with no chance of meeting any traffic, for all we could see was the pillar of dust thrown up by that drumming bike, and our own dust made a fat wedge right across the road.

I will give that beefy skunk his due; he could get every ounce of power out of his machine. I guessed what had happened, where he was concerned. He had lain low until the two men whom Blenkers had lent the machine to had returned it to the garage, then the beefy crook had gone there and claimed it again. It was just a piece of luck that let Lawless and I come through the High Street as the fellow was sneaking off. We had not had very much luck so far in the affair, and were entitled to our turn.

That chap must have known every road on the moors, for the dance he led us was a caution.

He turned into side roads, bumping over deep wheel-tracks, and making that Sunbeam fairly roll as it followed. I could see that now and again he was doubling back, just cutting patterns, so to speak, in the hope that he would shake us off. But we had filled up the petrol-tank before we started, and I reckoned that we could go as far as he could. Now and again on a downward slope he used to manage to steal a good mile on us, for a bike can shoot down a hill at a pace that no car can do, but we always managed to haul in the slack when it came to the level, and we could just hold our own on the hills.

By the speedometer we covered over sixty miles, with our dodging to and fro on that hinking moor, before the beggar put another stunt up that fairly knocked us. We had been tearing down a rather narrow road between two hedges, and we swung round sharp to the left, following the dust of the hike. I caught sight of the beefy fellow astride his machine, and it seemed to me that he had slackened speed slightly, and was looking back at us.

We spun forward, then suddenly I saw what the beggar was up to. His hike was just rushing across a narrow footbridge not more than four feet wide, and I yelled at Lawless just in the nick of time.

The Sunbeam was only forty yards away from that bridge when Lawless slammed on the brakes, and the big car fairly groaned as she skidded forward; but the brakes were top-hole stuff, and we came to a halt with the bonnet looking over the bridge and the two dumb-irons hard against the rails.

The car could not have gone across that

bridge even if it had been wide enough, for it was only a wooden structure spanning a rather deep and fast brook.

"That settles it," Lawless grunted.

I was out of the car in a jiffy, and he followed me. The road ended at the bridge, and we saw that it was a footpath that ran along beyond, following the side of the brook. The dust was still hanging above the path, telling us where the bike had gone; but there was no possible chance of us getting touch with it.

"He took us down the wrong turning—or, at least, the right one where he was concerned," I suggested. "We ought to have followed that other road."

"We'll follow it now," said Lawless, with a grim twitch of his jaw. "I am not nearly done with that fellow yet."

We climbed in the car again, and backed until we could turn, then we streaked off for the main road and followed it down to the left, and presently came in sight of the footpath again, running parallel to us. A road at right angles took us down to the spot where the footpath joined it, and we halted there for a moment.

We did not know whether our man had turned to right or left, and we had to search for tracks. But that road was as hard as a brick, and we might have searched for hours without finding a reliable track; but Lawless spotted a splash of fresh oil down the road and we took that as being a safe sign.

We beat down that road for a good five miles, always keeping our eyes open. There was a smell of petrol all right, and we were sure that the skunk had really taken that road; but we could not see him, not even his dust. We passed a ramshackle-looking place on the right of the road, and a mile lower down I noted that even the smell of petrol had vanished.

"Yes, I've noticed that, too, Tinker," said Lawless, with a grunt. "It seems to me that we've got to admit failure, and goodness only knows where we are."

It was getting pretty late now, so we kept a look-out for someone to direct us, and presently an old yokel came up to us, and we inquired our whereabouts.

"You be about half a mile from Mellon's Mill," he said.

We seemed to have heard quite a lot about that place during the last two days. We asked the old chap to put us right for Seareach, and he did so. We started off, and must have gone about five miles when the big idea came to me—came to me with a rush, and I grabbed at Lawless's arm.

"Lawless," I said, "we are a pair of blithering idiots. Do you know why we didn't smell petrol after we passed that tottering old ruin of a farmhouse?"

"Because it wasn't there!" said the big fellow.

"Right! But it had never been there. I mean that I'll bet a shilling that farm is known as Discombe, and it is the place mentioned by Bleekers to me."

The truth seemed to hit Lawless at once, and he stopped the Sunbeam.

"You've got it, young 'un," he agreed.

"That fellow dodged into Discombe Farm—went to earth like a fox, and we overran his trail."

I saw that for two pins he would have turned back there and then, but it struck me that it would be only a waste of time.

"No good of trying to pick him up now. I'm afraid," I said. "We might as well chuck it up. He got the better of us, and that's all there is to be said about it. But one thing we do know, and that is where to find Discombe Farm when we want to. That will be useful to us, perhaps."

It was the only consoling thought that I could get out of the blinking adventure. We were late getting back to the Imperial, and when we ran the car round to the garage Sam was waiting for us with another little item of news that rather knocked the wind out of our sails.

"Mr. Blake has been looking for you two all the afternoon," he reported. "I think dat there was some big scheme on, and he wanted you to get busy on it."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

Sam waved his black paw. "Gone," he said. "He tol' me to tell you dat he couldn't wait no longer, and so he was going off on his own. I got a message for you, Tinker."

He handed me a letter, and I opened it.

"Dear Tinker," it ran. "I want you to go across to Mellon's Mill and keep your eyes open. The name of the convict who is going to be released is Sedgill, and he will probably reach Mellon's Mill on Saturday morning early. You had better work up some sort of disguise, and you can get Lawless to help you, if he will. I want you to get in touch with Sedgill—and keep in touch. You will hear all about it when we meet again.

"THE GOVERNOR."

Lawless was reading the note over my shoulder, and he gave a short laugh at the end of it.

"You were a bit of a prophet, Tinker," he said. "We know the road to Mellon's Mill, and we can find that farm any old time we want to. It looks as though the scene was going to change, somehow. Next act is staged round that dilapidated old farm, unless I am very much mistaken."

"And you are open to take a part in it?" said I.

Lawless chuckled.

"Need you ask that," he returned. "We have been left in the lurch by Blake, but perhaps that was as much our fault as his. He couldn't be expected to hang on here while we scampered round the moors after that blinking motor-bike, could he?"

"Not very well," I said. "But I wish we'd never seen the bike, for it strikes me that the governor is going to walk into something extra hot, and he wanted us to join him, too, worse luck."

I was right, as will presently be shown. But I have finished my part of the affair, and I'm not sorry either. The rest of the yarn is not my death.

End of Tinker's Narrative.

Part II.

TOLD BY SEXTON BLAKE.

CHAPTER I.

I Head for the Lonely Island, and Witness a Strange Scene—Blenkers Holds Me Up, and We Get to Know Each Other Better.

TINKER has carried the report of this curious case forward to the stage when I really began to take part in it in an active manner. My interview with the managing-director of the insurance company had resulted in a definite promise on my part to undertake the case for him. But I must admit that I was almost as much in the dark as he was concerning the incident.

The mere fact that someone had sent him that letter, opening up a crime that he had considered dead, was, of course, suggestive. And the fact that the clever crook, whom I will call Vanley, was at Seareach at the time gave a connecting-link that appealed to me, for I had always thought that Vanley had had a hand in the Gorringe Museum affair. I had never been allowed to carry my investigations to an end, because the police seemed to have cleared up the case so well. The three men charged with it had all received sentences, and two of them had admitted their guilt, and testified to the guilt of the third man.

But the big factor in the case was that the swag had never been found. The two men who had received sentences for turning informers had sworn that it was the third individual who had actually carried away the booty and had hidden it. But he was a "lifer," and that fact seemed to settle any chance he might have had of getting out and enjoying his ill-gotten gains afterwards.

I simply mention these facts in order to indicate my thoughts on the matter at the time. I realised, of course, that that letter had been sent by someone who was no friend of Vanley's. The connection was much too obvious for me to mistake it. But although I was inclined to think that Blenkers's was the hand that had written the letter, I was not sure on the point.

Blenkers, however, interested me tremendously, much more than the real issue of the case, at first. I sensed that there was something behind his apparent eccentricity, something deep and well thought-out, for his face and eyes were those of a brainy, far-seeing individual. I never did think that he was deceived by Vanley. In my opinion, Blenkers knew the manner of man he had made his friend much better than either myself or Tinker.

Yet there was no getting away from the fact that Blenkers had deliberately intervened, not once, but twice, in order to save Vanley from the consequences of his deeds. And no man stretches out his hand to save a shark unless that shark is going to prove useful to him.

But that was just the rub! In what way could a rogue like Vanley help Blenkers?

The latter was a rich youngster, well known in the States, and of a good family. He had all that the world could give him, and certainly did not seem to need the assistance of a crook.

It was a puzzling question, and one that appealed to me.

And so, on the afternoon that Tinker and John Lawless went hunting that motor-cyclist all round the moors, I was arranging a move on my own. I had chartered a very roomy and swift motor-launch. It was one of the old sea-going boats that the Admiralty had commissioned in the days of the war. It was sixty feet long and ten feet beam—a comfortable and very seaworthy craft.

I meant to go out to that island and find out why Blenkers had taken Vanley there. I wanted Tinker and Lawless to come with me, but they did not turn up all day, and it was wasting time, for I had found out that Blenkers had set sail on board the Swallow just after dawn that morning. I guessed that he would reach Doblin Island about noon next day, or even earlier, for there was a steady north-easter blowing, and the Swallow could make a good many knots an hour when the wind favoured her, as it would then.

My plan was to get to the island before Vanley and Blenkers reached it, so that they might not be on the look-out. It is always an advantage to get ahead of your man in a case of this kind. If Blenkers reached the island first he would take care to keep a sharp look-out for anyone that might follow him. But he would not imagine for a moment that, with his long start, it would be possible for us to get there in front of him.

That was why I finally gave up waiting for Tinker and Lawless, and decided to do the run on my own. That motor-boat was a clipper for speed, and the engines were in tip-top condition. It was hard work running her single-handed, but I managed it. I had arranged my course before I started, and it meant making a very wide sweep out to sea, then back again for the island. I did not want to take any chances of running into Blenkers on the way out.

The launch did its steady eighteen knots an hour, and that is fast going. There were times when she even cracked up greater speed, and would have done even better, but I was running for half the distance without any lights, and I could not take too many chances.

I had calculated the distance to a nicety, and it was just breaking dawn when I headed in for the island, on the seaward side of it. I found a pretty snug-looking bay, and ran into it, mooring the launch in among a lot of tough old trees that grew right down on the beach. The island is about a couple of miles wide and about half that broad. It is really a flat-topped hill jutting out of the sea, and on the side that I was there was no way of reaching the hill-top except by a winding goat-track, and a very bad one at that. However, after I had completely hidden the launch, I tackled the path, and managed to get on to the table-land above. I could see the ruins of the old castle on the other side, and also the few storm-beaten

huts and houses that had once been used by the family of fishermen who had lived on that barren isle. I hurried across and got into the village, and found a spot in the cliffs where I could lie down comfortably and keep watch on the bay below. There was a bit of a jetty and an old landing-stage there, and I noticed a hattered skiff drawn up on the beach, but there was no sign of life and no sign of the Swallow.

I had a haversack with a good supply of food, and I made a meal there, knowing that sooner or later Blenkers was bound to turn up. But it was well after noon before the yacht appeared in the distance, and it was almost four o'clock before she ran up to the jetty, and I saw the lean and lanky figure of "Gaalhird"—for that was the name that Tinker gave Blenkers!—climb out and slip a rope over a rusted stanchion.

He went back on board, and I saw him lower the sails and leave them trim. It took him twenty minutes or so to do this, and during the whole time I never caught a glimpse of Vanley. I was just beginning to think that Blenkers was alone on board when he vanished into the turtle-back cabin, and came out presently with Vanley hanging on to his arm.

One glance told me what was the matter with the crook.

He was drunk!

His legs could hardly bear him, and he clung to the arm of his companion as he swayed across the deck and reached the jetty. Now a clever crook like Vanley does not let himself get into that state unless he feels very safe, and can indulge himself without taking any risks. To be cooped up in a little yacht for thirty-six hours is a rather tiresome sort of experience, and I decided that Vanley had passed the time away by frequent visits to the brandy-bottle.

They crossed the jetty, and came on up the road that wound to the top of the hill. Vanley was reeling from side to side, and it was all Blenkers could do to hold the reeling wretch on his feet. I was too far away to see their faces clearly, but once I saw Blenkers make a sort of threatening movement, which made me smile.

They vanished from my view when they turned down behind the high stone wall of the castle, and I lay back in my comfortable hiding-place and worked out a plan of action.

I was wanting to find out why Blenkers had come to this lonely place, and why Vanley had accompanied him. To do that I would have to get to much closer quarters with the two, and I would have to wait until it was dusk before venturing forward, for the castle stood above the level of the hill, and from its ruined windows anyone could sweep the whole space, so that a rabbit could hardly have moved without being observed.

I had cause to congratulate myself on my deciding to wait in my hiding-place, for just about dusk Blenkers came out of the gap in the wall of the ruined castle, and went off down the road towards the jetty. I slipped out of my place and worked my way along the hill until I was close to the wall; then, by following it, I found a small gap

that allowed me to get through, and I worked across the grass-grown courtyard of the ruins until I was almost opposite the wide space in the wall that Blenkers had emerged by. There was a heap of stones close by, and I made myself comfortable behind them. Half an hour passed, then Blenkers returned, and he was carrying a well-filled sack across his shoulders. He came across the courtyard, and passed within a few feet of where I was hidden. I wanted to find out where he had left Vanley, and so I followed his movements attentively. He went round one angle of the old place, and I finally saw his lanky figure vanish into the east wing of the building. It was dark now, and I was not afraid of being seen, so I headed for the east wing. I found a narrow doorway, and saw a short flight of steps leading up from it, but I thought it better not to venture inside for the moment. Stepping back again, I caught sight of a clear light-shining through one of the slotted windows on the ground level, and I headed for it.

Blenkers and Vanley—his arm bandaged—were inside the room, which, I saw, was furnished in a rough sort of way. There was a cot in the corner, and one or two rickety-looking chairs and a table. They looked like cottage furniture, probably put there by someone who had been in charge of the castle in the days when there were people living on the island. It struck me at the time that it was rather curious that Blenkers should have been able to find what was practically the only furnished chamber in the whole ruins.

Vanley was seated in one of the chairs, and his heavy face was twisted into a frown. The influence of the drink was beginning to die now, and I could see that he was in an ugly temper. I only just glanced into the chamber, then withdrew my head again and listened.

Blenkers was emptying the sack, which I had seen contained blankets and an assortment of food, together with a spirit-stove and a supply of fuel.

It was evident that Vanley did not like the arrangements, for I heard:

"I don't know what you brought all that grub up for," he said. "We ain't going to stop here for a week, you know."

"I guess not," Blenkers returned. "Only we'll have to wait until to-morrow, and we might as well have plenty to eat."

Vanley muttered an oath.

"Can't understand why you wanted to drag me out to this darned place, anyhow," he said. "I'll allow that you've sort of proved yourself a real sport and you've done me one or two good turns, but I don't think anything of this trip. What in Hades have we got to do with castles, anyhow?"

Blenkers laughed.

"You know what was back of my scheme, Mr. Vanley," he drawled. "I sort of opined that there were some enemies of yours at that hotel. That fellow Lawless didn't seem to love you exactly, and then the other man, Blake, was also playing round, as I told you."

This was news to me, and I listened intently. So far as I was aware, I had made

no sort of move, openly or covertly, where Vanley was concerned.

The crook muttered an oath.

"It beats me how that dog, Blake, got wind about me being down at Searach," he said. "Mind you, Mr. Blenkers, there is nothing wrong in my records. I'm a bit of a gambler, and that's all. But these English detectives are always out to try and fix any man that they dislike, and Blake has had a grouse on me for a long time."

"Yes, you told me about that, Mr. Vanley," Blenkers returned, in a very soft voice. "That is why I helped you. For I have no time for these police-spies and trouble-seekers. And as you were a fellow-countryman of mine, I wasn't going to sit still and let the Britishers walk on you."

"Oh, you've been a friend all right," Vanley returned. "And I'm much obliged. But still, I can't help wondering how the blazes Blake managed to turn up at that blinking hotel. It has sort of upset my little plans, and that is a fact."

Now, I had settled in my mind that there was only one man responsible for that telegram that had brought me from Paris, and that was the lean, convict-cropped American. But Blenkers's voice was as cool as possible when he replied.

"These 'ceca have spies everywhere," he said. "I guess this fellow, Blake, thought there was something about you that wanted watching. I told you what I'd heard from that youngster, Tinker. He told me that he was down in Searach looking out for a shark—a mean, low-down skunk, who was wanted badly by the police for a job that was done a long time ago—three years ago, he said!"

The drawing voice had changed its note, but only a quick ear could have caught the menace in it. I knew that Tinker had never said anything of the kind to Blenkers, and I knew there, listening, and wondering what sort of lie Blenkers would fire off next!

Vanley moved in his chair.

"He couldn't have meant me, Mr. Blenkers," the rogue said in a voice that tried to be steady but revealed the bluff clearly enough. "I don't know anything about jobs done three years ago in this country. Why should I?"

"Of course, you don't, Vanley! But that is what that young detective told me, and you remember how Blake stopped dead at our table and gathered you in with one look. I reckon he's a tough sort of nut to get over, that man Blake!"

That man Blake gave him a little bow for the complaint, although I was a bit fogged to understand how Blenkers knew that my association with Vanley had started just exactly three years ago!

"Anyhow," Blenkers went on. "We've got the better of him. No one knows where we are, and by the time we get back to Searach I guess Blake and the rest of them will have cleared out. In any case, we can get aboard without anyone noticing us, and that appointment that you've got to keep isn't until Saturday, is it?"

"No, that's so," Vanley returned.

"To-morrow is Wednesday," Blenkers went on. "And I reckon if we start from here about midnight then we'll hit Searach on Friday morning early. That will give you a chance to get away without being noticed, and you can meet your friends."

"Yes, I suppose that it is just about the safest stunt we could have worked," grumbled Vanley. "But I sort of wish you'd picked out a less lonesome spot than this square yard of earth in the middle of nothing. If anything were to happen to that little schooner of yours, for instance, I can see us both doing the Robinson Crusoe business here until we died!"

The table creaked as he rose to his feet.

"I guess I'll have a stretch out," he went on. "I'm feeling a bit heavy—that brandy they gave you was dope. I don't wonder you being on the water-wagon with stuff like that to handle."

He lumbered across the chamber, and I heard the rusty springs of the cot creak as his heavy form was flung on it. I ventured another glance into the room, and noted that Blenkers was arranging the food on a dusty shelf in front of the table. Now and again he would turn and glance at the figure on the cot, and at last he tiptoed across and bent over it.

"Vanley!" he said, in a low voice.

There was no reply, save the heavy breathing of the crook. Blenkers straightened up, and I saw his face under the light of the lamp. I never realised what burning eyes he had until I saw them, then they were filled with a fire that seemed to light up the whole face—a fire as deep as it was fierce. He drew one deep breath, then over his lean features there swept a smile, and his lips parted.

"At last!" he whispered, in a low tone.

With a couple of light steps he reached the table and extinguished the light; then I heard him move across the chamber, and presently the soft thud of a closing door came to me, followed by the wheeze of a heavy key.

It struck me then that Blenkers was about to desert his companion, and I arose to my feet and slipped along the wall towards the door. I was only just in the nick of time, for a moment later the lean form came out of the door and started off across the courtyard.

I had made up my mind to follow him, and I did it. I think I can move as nifty as most men, and I was careful to pick my way across the grass-grown space towards the gap, through which Blenkers had passed.

I had seen his figure vanish down the slope, and I must admit that I had no idea of what was going to happen when that lanky arm shot out suddenly from the wall on the right of the gap and caught at my throat.

He must have heard me, and had simply dodged round beneath the slope and awaited my appearance through the wall.

There was no fight.

One hand was at my throat, but the other was pressing something against my ribs, and I knew what that something was.

"If you move a hair you're a dead man!"

said Blenkers, in the slow voice that means every word it says.

In my time I have taken risks, and have pulled them off; but I have never taken risks with a revolver jammed against my ribs, for that is not taking risks at all, but asking for trouble.

I just stood still while that muzzle pressed tighter on my ribs, and the long, lean hand presently fell away from my throat.

"Who are you?" asked Blenkers, leaning forward and trying to see me through the darkness.

But I wasn't sure of him then, and I remembered that I was wearing a suit of oil-skins and an old boating-cap that was pulled well down over my head. Blenkers might be playing a game of his own with Vankey, but he might also find my presence in his game a reason for removing it!

"I ain't done nothing, mister," I said, imitating the accent of the coasting folk. "I comed here for to see if I could get some odd bits of tackle—that be all."

I could see that Blenkers was taken aback.

"You came here, did you?" he said. "How in Hades did you manage it? Did you swim?"

"No, mister. My boat be tied up along the beach on t'other side of island," said I. "I only just comed up, and was looking round when I sawed you come out of the castle, mister, and I followed ye."

I don't think Blenkers was convinced, but, anyhow, I had caused him to have a doubt.

He stepped aside, with the revolver still levelled.

"I guess I'll have a look at you," he said. "Jest walk straight down that road, and keep on remembering that I'll be one foot behind you, and I use a hair-trigger. You get me?"

"I ain't done nothing, mister," I said, backing away from his raised arm.

"There's a lot of men gone to glory for doing just that," he drawled. "Keep right straight down the road, and you'll be safe."

So off I went down the steep, winding road, with the "Gadbird" stalking along a yard behind me. I knew that his revolver was pointing right at my spine, and his eyes never left me. Again it was an occasion where risks are futile.

But I did not mean Blenkers to have it all his own way. Between Tinker and Lawless and I there was quite a nice little hill that we had to present to this lanky American cousin of ours, and I made up my mind that Blenkers should hear the charges before that night was over.

Yet I had to wait till we were on the jetty before he gave me the least chance. I think Blenkers was quite safe in lowering his weapon for that brief moment while he ordered me to stoop and reach for the yacht's rope, to draw it up to the jetty. Nine out of every ten men would have done just what he ordered, but I suppose I was the tenth.

He was five feet away from me, and as I stooped I saw the revolver dangling between his long fingers. He had lowered his arms, and was standing easy—a dangerous trick to do.

A Japanese ju-jitsu expert had shown me a way of bowing over an opponent when that opponent is a man's length away from you and thinks himself safe. The hands and arms have nothing to do with that move. It is the legs that do all the work, and they usually do it very effectively. By throwing yourself on your hands and thrusting out your legs you can place one foot just below the knees of your opponent and the other foot just above. Then, with a quick clipping movement of the feet, bring them sharply towards each other; that opponent will find his feet knocked clean away from him, and will come down like a sack.

That is what happened to Blenkers.

He was just in the right distance, and was quite unprepared. Then, again, he was rather long in the legs, and that gave me a double advantage.

I shot out my feet, did the clip, and Blenkers went backwards over the edge of the jetty into the sea. The jetty was only about three feet above the sea level then—it was high tide, I think—and as he came, coughing and spluttering, up to the surface I whipped out my pocket-torch, switched on the light, grabbed his revolver, and covered him as he treaded water.

"Now, Mr. Blenkers," I said quietly. "you have had your innings, and it is about time that I had mine."

He could swim like a duck, and I saw him shake the water from his eyes as he stared up at the glowing light.

"Who the blazes are you?" he gasped.

A couple of strokes carried him to the jetty, and he reached up and caught one of the old wooden cross-pieces. He saw the revolver pointed straight at his wet head, and he didn't take any chances.

"We will carry on our conversation when you climb up here," I observed.

He came up like an eel, and as he stood up I was waiting for him.

"It is a hair-trigger, Blenkers," I said. "And I'm not so used to it as you are, so don't tempt me."

He laughed grimly.

"I won't," he said. "For I guess I've got you, sir. I kind of thought that voice was familiar, though I ain't heard it very often. Your name is Sexton Blake."

I had never spoken to Blenkers, so it was a proof of his keen observation that he should have recognised my voice so swiftly.

"That is correct," I said.

He gave himself a shake for all the world like a big Newfoundland dog.

"Then, by gee, I'm in luck," he observed; "for you are the very man I wanted to see."

That was rather tall, and I smiled.

"You came to Dohinn Island to see me, Mr. Blenkers?" I said. "I don't think that yarn will carry."

He laughed.

"I don't mean that," he returned. "What I meant is that I was just going to leave this island and look you up at the Imperial as soon as I could get back to Sea-Reach."

I looked at him. I was still covering him with the light of the torch.

"You have a queer way of trying to arrange appointments or interviews, Mr. Blenkers," I said.

He jerked his head towards the steep road. "I had to make sure that there wouldn't be any eavesdropper," he returned, in a hard, slow voice. "I've got rid of the most likely listener—and that was what I came here to do."

"So you were going to slip off and leave your friend, Vanley?"

"There is not going to be any 'were' in it," he returned. "I am going to leave Vanley. I reckoned out that he has seven days' food there—and that is all the time I'll need him to keep out of the way."

I saw that he was telling the truth. Even Vanley had commented on the enormous stock of food that Blenkers had carried up with him to the castle. But the reason of it was explained now.

"And you were going to head back for Searach and look me up at the Imperial?" I went on. "But how did you know that I would be there at your convenience?"

"I fixed you—the managing-director of an insurance company got a letter!" He laughed suddenly. "I can see that it worked all right."

I had suspected that it was Blenkers who had sent that letter, and here he was admitting it with unblushing effrontery.

"That letter referred to a certain crime—a crime that has not yet been satisfactorily settled," I said slowly. "You must know a great deal about it, Mr. Blenkers—more than perhaps is good for anyone to know."

His eyes suddenly widened, and I heard him draw a swift breath.

"Yes," he said, in a troubled voice; "I know a great deal about that crime—more than most men; more than I would have ever wished to know. It has haunted me for three years, Blake; hut, by heavens, I am going to lay that grim spectre at last!"

He pulled himself up sharply.

"But we've got to get away from here before that brute wakens up," he said.

"I don't want to kill him, although he deserves death for the misery he has caused. I want to let him stay here, believing that I've wandered off and will return again."

A glint came into his eyes.

"And I will return," he muttered. "Return with a burden that he will not relish."

Then he suddenly changed his tone.

"But you have something to explain to me," he said. "How did you get here?"

I told him.

Already I was conscious of the great personal charm of this man. I knew that Lawson had made friends with him at once, and so had Tinker. I could quite understand that now, for Blenkers was of that type of American whose voice and manner and genuine good nature break down all barriers. Then and there I felt that I was going to help him—even before I had heard his story.

"A motor-launch! Say! That was a slick scheme. I never thought about gasoline, or I wouldn't have chartered the Swallow."

Then he flung an arm towards me.

"I want to get back to Searach just as fast as I can," he said. "Can we get round to where your launch is and work her out, with the Swallow? She could take this little hooker in tow then; and we ought to get back to Searach by to-morrow afternoon."

It was a rather quaint close to my adventure, yet it seemed to be a fitting one. It was two hours later before we managed to work the Swallow round on the light breeze and gain the launch. I got on board the launch and made Blenkers bring her up to the Swallow, and the yacht tugged the launch out for about a mile before we reversed roles.

"We might as well let Vanley enjoy his sleep," I explained. "If he had heard the launch engines he'd have been down the cliff in quick time."

The Swallow had all her sails stowed away, and Blenkers and I were in the motor-launch, which was chugging away steadily, making very light of her tow. I had a thousand questions to ask the lanky man, but I thought that they could keep until we were on shore again. We both had plenty of work to do taking turn and turn at the tiller, then the engines. We held on right through the night, and I saw the grey mel-land when the dawn broke. But I knew that we could not make Searach. The petrol-supply was giving out.

I had a look at the map and saw that the best I could do would be to run for Manbers, which was about fifteen miles down the coast from Searach. I gave the news to Blenkers, and he seemed rather relieved than otherwise.

"I don't mind where we land, as long as we get there," he said to me. He looked rather tired, and I dare say I had the same appearance.

It was a very near thing that trip. I don't believe that we had more than a half a pint of petrol left in the tank when the launch touched against the pier at Manbers, and we had been nursing the engines very carefully for the last ten miles.

"I don't feel inclined for any more ocean travel," the lanky American remarked. "I suggest that we get some of these fishermen here to run the crafts round to Searach, and we can go on there by road. I want a change, and a wash, and a decent meal."

It was not a bad suggestion, and before we left the pier I had arranged with the harbour-master that that launch and the yacht would be taken and handed over to their owners at Searach.

Blenkers and I looked like a couple of scarecrows as we went through the town, and Manbers is a rather fashionable place, so we were both glad to dive into a hotel at last, and enjoy the luxury of a bath and a general clean up. Of course Blenkers, with his prison-crop and bristly chin, came in for a great deal of attention; but he seemed to have got quite used to that, and we had a good meal in the dining-room, quite untroubled by the stares of the other diners.

"I like it," he said, in that grim way of his. "I never found myself much of a

public attraction until I started in on this style of facial ornament—and now wherever I go I get a crowd like a fourth of July celebration."

But when we were both together in a quiet corner of the hotel his flippant mood changed.

"I suppose you want to get straight back to Searceach, Mr. Blake?" he began. "You'll be wanting to get into touch with Mr. Lawless and Tinker?"

I shook my head.

"I know where they are to be found," I said, "and it isn't at Searceach, but at a place called Melion's Mill."

I saw his eyes light up.

"How do you know that they are there?" he asked.

"Because I asked them to go there," I returned. "I had a little bit of news that was rather interesting, and I wanted them to follow it up."

"Was it in connection with—with the Gorrings Museum affair?"

"Yes. I discovered that the name of the convict who was going to be released on Saturday is Sedgill. And I wanted them to get along there and look out for him."

Blenkers long face broadened into a smile.

"That was bully for you, sir," he said. "How did you find out?"

I explained to him that I had got the inspector at Searceach to phone through to the prison for particulars.

"There is a new governor there," I went on, "and he was rather officious, but we managed to get the information."

"A new governor," said Blenkers slowly. "I guess I met him."

I smiled. Lawless had told me about that incident on the links.

"You did," I said. "And under the circumstances, it is rather a good thing for you that you will never be called upon to be under his charge—in his present position, at any rate."

He gave me a queer smile.

"It would be kind of awkward for me, wouldn't it?" he returned slowly.

There was a short pause, then he went on:

"I don't want to go to Searceach—until it is dark. There might be someone there who would wonder what had happened to Vanley if I were seen without him. That is why I want to get there when it is dark."

"Vanley has plenty of friends, then, who would miss him?"

His eyes gleamed.

"Vanley has no friends, but he has a lot of associates," he corrected. "I want them to think that he and I are still together; and I want to get through Searceach to-night, and out on to the moors for a few hours."

He suddenly leaned towards me.

"I'm going to tell you a story, and ask you a favour, Mr. Blake," he said, his eyes fixed on mine. "But I don't feel inclined to tell you just yet. It all depends on what happens to-night. I have been working to a time-table, and meant to get back to Searceach by this evening. Your motor-lunch helped me to do the trip about ten hours

sooner than I had calculated, and I'm inclined to make use of that ten hours, if I can."

"It is a pity to waste time," I said.

"Then if you think that, will you join me in a little bit of business that I want to carry out?" said Blenkers. "I was going to leave it to chance, but this spare ten hours will allow me to make sure."

"You are asking me to join you, but you say nothing about the plan," Blenkers, I pointed out. "I don't usually go into anything blindfolded."

"There is a man who has some information that I would like to get hold of," Blenkers explained. "He is the man who rode that motor-bike when Vanley was at the Glades. Vanley went there to meet him because the man had some definite plans. No doubt Vanley heard these plans, but I didn't. I think I know what is going to happen, but if we could collar that other fellow and get him to speak, then we would be sure."

"Sure—of what?" I asked.

He nodded to me.

"Sure of bringing to light the truth concerning the Gorrings Museum case," he returned slowly. "That is what I am working on—and you are on the same line."

"Yes, I am on the same line—thanks to that letter you sent," I pointed out. "But it rather seems to me that you have arranged everything, even to my being asked to take up the case again."

His thin lips lifted into a smile.

"Listen, Mr. Blake," he said earnestly. "I know all about your connection with that case. I know that you had taken quite a different line from that followed by the police. I know that you suspected Vanley, when no one else did. And by heavens, sir, you were right, and I have come across the world to help you prove your point."

He nodded to me.

"To help you prove your point; and, at the same time, carry out a little scheme of my own, that runs parallel with yours," he added.

It seemed rather extraordinary to me that this man, an utter stranger to myself, should be able to tell me all these things.

"How did you get to know that I had been after Vanley?"

"He told me so himself," came the abrupt reply. "He didn't mention any date or any case, but I could fill in the blanks myself. Then I got in touch with a firm of solicitors in London, and they fitted in all the details. I guess I could give you every point of the case so far as you were concerned, sir, right up to the moment that the insurance company told you to quit, because they were going to pay."

After that explanation it seemed simple enough. All the details were in possession of the insurance company, including my confidential report on Vanley. A skilled solicitor could easily have hunted up the papers and made a complete report.

A sudden smile crossed Blenkers' face.

"Shall I tell you something else that I did?" he said slowly. "Well, I knew that the Honourable John Lawless and Tinker and

yourself were close friends. I knew that you were away from London, though I did not know where. But I wanted you to come down to Seareach, and so I sent Lawless a lot of pamphlets regarding the town and the new golf-links. He must have looked at them, and made up his mind to come down again to the links. He had played there before, and I know that a golfer will always return to an old love—if you'll only jog his memory a little."

I had to chuckle at that.

"Then, indirectly you were really responsible for Lawless and Tinker coming down to Seareach."

"It was only a shot in the dark," said this curious being. "But I know how those illustrated particulars of hotels and links affect me. I always want to go and try them, and I guess that Lawless would have the same human feeling."

It seemed to me that the ramifications of this man's activities were endless, and I said as much.

"Don't think that I am clever," he said. "But when a man has lived for one thing, has dreamed of that thing, and plotted for that thing for the best part of three years, he must be able to make some sort of show, or be altogether a fool."

He stood up then and straightened his lean frame.

"The big trial of them all is right ahead of me," he went on. "I am ready to face it now, because I feel that there is a fighting chance. And I've got the one man behind me that I wanted—the one man who suspected the truth when everyone else went wrong."

He pointed at me with a long, lean finger.

"You are that man, Mr. Blake," he said.

Then he smiled grimly.

"And now, we've done enough talking," he went on. "I want to hire an automobile—and I guess I'll leave that to you. Whenever I go into a strange garage and hike around for a car, the manager starts huffing me, while the assistant rings up the police. They always reckon I've just broken away, and they won't let me go until we've sent about six telegrams to different people, from the American ambassador to my last landlord."

I went out and got a car, and about noon we left Maulbers, and took the road that ran back across the moors towards Seareach. But half-way there Blenkers picked out a cross-roads that he seemed to recognise, and presently we were running through a bare space of country without any sign of house or village. At another fork in the road I caught a glimpse of a same on a weather-beaten sign-post:

"Mellon's Mill: 4 miles."

Blenkers caught my look, and nodded his head.

"We are not going to the junction," he said. "We will stop about two miles outside it."

We halted at last in a little spinney, and Blenkers steered the car right in among the trees and left it there, so that it could not be seen from the road.

"I'm working on the guess now," he admitted. "I know that I arranged for Vanley's friend to borrow my motor-bike whenever he wanted it, and I also know that a farm called Discombe is the place where—where things are going to happen."

He looked at me.

"When a man is fighting against a crook, he's got to work crooked," he said. "The last time I met Vanley was in Frisco, and he was waiting there for a letter from England. That letter came—but it was handed to me first. I steamed it and opened it, then closed it again, and left it on his desk. I guess he never knew that it had been tampered with."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It gave me all the information I wanted at the time," he went on. "It gave the date when this man Sedgill—though I didn't know his name until you told me—was due to be released. I told Vanley that he would have to be there on the day to meet the released man, and the other men who was mixed up in the business but had never been touched. That other man is the stout rascal whom you know. He had never met Vanley, and he described himself in the letter, so that Vanley would recognise him—and I recognised him as well, when I met him and Vanley that morning after they tried to murder you."

"What is his name?" I asked.

Blenkers shook his head.

"Vanley called him Sam, and that is all I know about him," he returned grimly. "But perhaps this afternoon we will get to know a little more about—Sam."

He was leading the way down a short slope, and I found myself on the edge of a wide, deep brook. We followed the brook for about a mile, then my guide crossed it at a fording-place, and continued along the brook, but this time we waded through the shallow part on the left bank. The bank was high enough to hide us from view of anyone on the moor, and we kept along it until Blenkers halted at a part of the bank where a gully had been cut.

"We'll have to do a little crawling now," he said, as he knelt down.

He managed to fold his long body enough to enter the gully, and I kept close to him. The gully was arched over with briar, and was about twenty yards long. It ended in a shallow duck-pond, green with slime, that stood in the centre of a dilapidated farmyard. There were buildings on every side of the yard, cowsheds, hayloft, and barns, beyond the barns stood the ramshackle farmhouse, and it was towards it that Blenkers and I picked our way through the rotted garbage and weed-covered yard.

"I've heard the history of this place," said Blenkers. "It belongs to an old farmer who was once held up by a couple of escaped convicts from the prison. He claimed compensation from the authorities, and they only laughed at him. So he swore that he would let the farm go to rack and ruin, and he did. Queer sort of way of getting your own back that, I guess."

While he spoke he was keeping a sharp

look-out, and my eyes were busy, too. I discovered a couple of tracks in the mud that ran up to one of the barns, and pointed them out to him.

"Motor-cycle tyres," I said.

He bent over them and nodded.

"That is another one to you, sir," he returned. "I recognise the pattern, too. My bike has been here—if Sam hasn't."

We got into the farm by way of the back door. It was padlocked, but I managed to open the lock easily enough. We searched the rambling house and found plenty of traces of recent occupation. Stumps of cigars of a very good brand, and a couple of empty whisky bottles, not to mention various empty tins. One of the rooms had been used to sleep in, for there were a couple of blankets and a thick rug on it.

"Our man has been here—and what is more, is likely to return," Blenkers said. "I'm in no hurry until this evening, and the car is safe enough. Shall we wait for Sam?"

His face was set and grim, and I could see that he had made up his mind, so I nodded.

"We might as well, I suppose," I said.

We went down to the kitchen, and Blenkers fished around and found a half-filled box of biscuits in a cupboard. They were quite crisp and fresh, proving that they had not been there very long. We made a decent meal of them; and presently it began to grow dusk, and Blenkers went across to the lattice-window that looked out on the yard and stood there like a statue, watching and waiting.

"Mr. Blake!"

Half an hour passed before I heard that quiet whisper. I was at his side at once.

"Someone has just come up past the duck-pond," he whispered. "I guess it is our man."

His voice was very steady, but I could feel that the lean body was tense and rigid as it stood there. There was some grim force that was driving this man forward, some great passion that ruled his every action, grotesque and strange though so many of them seemed.

We both took up our stations without any signal. I slipped behind the door of the kitchen, and Blenkers flattened his long body out against the angle of the walls.

Ten minutes passed before the padlock and chain rattled, then we heard a heavy footfall outside the kitchen door and the thick, heavy breathing that always indicates the presence of a man of the fleshy build.

The man came on and entered the doorway, then halted there and began to fumble in his pocket. In another moment he would have struck a match and have discovered Blenkers, but the lean American took no chances. With a noiseless leap, he was on Sam, and I swung round the door and joined him.

That beefy ruffian fought well. He must have known what was going to happen to him, for he put up a tiger battle that surprised me. I wondered then why he should have been so swiftly on the alert, but I learned afterwards the reason of it. For Sam was the man that Lawless and Tinker had

chivvied all over the moors on the day that I left Seareach, and he was well aware that there were enemies on his track.

But he had no chance with us. Blenkers must have been giving him a good two stone, but the fury of the lean man's attack more than made up for that, and I think myself that Blenkers would have overpowered his huge adversary single-handed.

He wasn't called on to do that, for I managed to get a lock on the thick legs and downed him; then, while he was gripping at Blenkers' throat, I felt for my handcuffs, and took advantage of the fact that the two thick wrists were close together, and clapped the darbies on them.

I have always discovered that the touch of cold steel round the wrists of a rogue acts like magic. All the fight seemed to pour out of the powerful ruffian, and his hands fell limply across his chest.

"The—the police!" he gasped. "Then, it—it's a fair cop!"

Blenkers arose from the floor and went across to the stable where a small oil-lamp stood. He lighted the wick and turned it up. Sam was just dragging himself to his feet, and I stood in front of the fellow ready for any sign of mischief he might make.

But Sam's eyes had fallen on Blenkers, and the quick expression of relief that crossed his sweating face made me smile inwardly.

"Pshaw! By James, Mr. Blenkers, you gave me a fright," he said. "Why the blazes didn't you say who you were?"

He took a pace across the kitchen and held out his hands.

"What about these things?" he added.

"Better take them off. I don't like the touch of them!"

He was looking into the long, lean face, and something in the terrible expression of it brought his speech to a halting close.

"You don't like the touch of them, Sam?" Blenkers drawled. "Well, that may be true. But better men than you have felt that touch and have had to suffer all the degradation that it means."

He thrust his cold face forward.

"Do you get me, Sam?" he breathed.

"Better men than you—innocent men—have been handcuffed and led into prison—that the likes of you might wait your chance and make a fortune out of their misery."

The beefy rascal fell back against the wall, staring with panicky eyes at the speaker.

"But you—you are Vanley's friend," he gasped. "Didn't you help him and I when we were likely to get pinched? What has all this talk about—about innocent men got to do with us?"

Blenkers smiled, a cold, menacing smile.

"Yes, I helped Vanley and I helped you, because I was waiting my time, Sam," he said. "I had to find out a few things and arrange a few things. I have arranged the things, and now I'm out for information."

He came across the room and stood in front of the heavy-jowled ruffian.

"You are going to meet Sedgill, the man who turned informer in the Gorrings case, on Saturday," he said. "You've been waiting

for Sedgill—waiting very patiently, and now you are out to get your reward."

"Where the blazes— How do you know?"

"That doesn't matter to you, Sam," came the grim reply. "I know that you were watching events here for Vanley. You were the third man in the job, the mysterious third who managed to sneak out of the net and has lain very low ever since. Sedgill comes out on Saturday, and you and Vanley were going to meet him—and unearth the swag!"

I could see the blotched face of the listener twitching, and his eyes were dim with fear.

"But Vanley is bottled up, and you are going to be bottled up," the cold, drawing voice murmured. "Sedgill will be met by his friends—but they won't be either you or Vanley. But I'm going to give you a chance. Tell the truth now and you'll go down light. You understand?"

Sam licked his dried lips and opened them as though to speak. Then I saw that hang-dog, sullen expression that I know so well sweep over his features. I could have told Blenkers there and then that Sam would not peach. There was something that frightened him; something that made him bold his peace, even though the promise had been made of freedom.

"I don't know what you're driving at," he snarled, finding his voice again. "I know nothing about Sedgill or any other convict."

Then he broke out into a torrent of curses, reviling Blenkers for the double game he had played. I will not repeat that foul invective. It made no impression on the tall listener.

"We'll leave it like that, then," said Blenkers. "You stick to your side, and I'll play on mine. But I'm going to leave you safe here—safe until someone can come along and take you to the proper place, the gaol."

Half an hour later we left Sam tied down to the cot in the upper room, as helpless as a child. By his side Blenkers left a huge pile of biscuits and a jug of water. Sam could just reach the food with his hand-cuffed hands, but they could not reach for the knots and the cords that held him to his cot.

"How long do you mean to leave him there, Blenkers?" I asked.

He smiled grimly.

"I guess he won't hurt for a few hours," he said quietly. "By to-morrow morning you can fix up about him. I guess that the police will take your word when it comes to arresting a man without asking too many questions. I want him out of the way until Saturday, and after that day there won't be any difficulty of getting a charge against him, nor the other crook on Dobbin Island."

I knew that the stout rogue would not take much harm before the morning, so I fell in with Blenkers' suggestion, and we left the farm together and turned up the brook again, finally reaching the little spinney where the car had been hidden.

When we got to the car Blenkers, for the first time, began to show signs of nerves. He walked to the edge of the spinney and stared out across the dark moors, then came slowly back again.

"Look here, Blake," he said. "I'm not sure whether I should ask you to go any further in this. What I am going to do now isn't what you would call strictly legal; in fact, most of my methods so far have not been the kind of stuff that the honest man lays out. But I've been working against a crook, and I've just used his own class of weapons."

I nodded to him.

"You are not the only man who has had to play cunning against cunning, Blenkers," I said quietly.

I could see his face brighten in a smile.

"No, perhaps not. But while that stuff was good enough against Vanley, I don't know that you'd swallow it against the other people that I've got to tackle now."

I did not understand what he was driving at, of course, but I had made up my mind what manner of man he was.

"We've called a partnership, Blenkers," I remarked. "And that is good enough for me. I pick my man on his merits, and whatever you are going to do I'll stand in on it."

He thrust out his long hand.

"I'd like to shake on that, sir," he said. "I'm going to put you to a mighty big test; but you're a white man, and I think you'll find that I am another."

We shook hands, and then he strode back to the car and started up the engine, and we hooked into the road again. I noticed that he had not turned on the headlights; we were driving by the side ones only, and they were very weak, throwing a glimmer such as an ordinary dog-cart might have done.

Blenkers sat, as dumb as an oyster at that wheel, picking his road across the moor. He was steering for some place, but I could not get the direction at all. We must have crawled on for about a couple of hours, at never more than eight or nine miles an hour, and it seemed to me that we steered in a sort of half-circle during the time. I reckoned that it was about ten o'clock when, on climbing slowly up a short rise, Blenkers pulled in on the turf and brought the car to a halt.

I saw a long stretch of dark valley ahead, and on the opposite side, only just visible against the dark sky, loomed a huge barrack-like building. Here and there a light shone from it, and I noticed a warm glow from the centre of the massive structure. It was that warm glow that gave me a cine.

Every modern prison is built like a series of galleries, with a glass-roofed, central space where exercise may be given to the convicts during bad weather.

It was the huge bleak prison that loomed ahead.

I guessed that it was a good five miles away, and I knew that we were on the landward side of it, and that Searesch lay another ten miles beyond the prison. Blenkers had, as a matter of fact, worked his way right round the gloomy pile, and now he was staring at it with grim, intent eyes.

He moved the car forward presently for another quarter of a mile or so, and again peered at the prison. Then, apparently satisfied at last, he did a rather curious

thing, for he reached forward and turned on the headlamps once, twice, three times.

Just a twitch of the switch then darkness again. The great shafts of light following each other in rapid succession.

He was signalling to the prison!

I sat still, staring out across the gloomy space, then suddenly I saw a faint star of light twinkle for a moment in one of the dark spaces high up on the building—and the upper storeys of a prison are always occupied by the convicts.

The star of light faded almost as soon as it appeared, and I heard Blenkers give a sigh of relief, then suddenly his gloom seemed to vanish and he laughed aloud.

"Now for the Imperial Hotel, Mr. Blake," he said. "I guess I could do with a nice hefty beef-steak and a big portion of fried onions."

He swung the car round, switched on the headlamps, and fairly let the engine have its full power. We had taken hours to do that slow journey out to the far side of the prison, but less than three-quarters of an hour saw us sliding down the long slope into Seareach.

And all the way Blenkers laughed and talked like a schoolboy out for a holiday.

"I wouldn't be getting into Seareach like this if we hadn't settled our friend Sam," he remarked. "But there is no one in Seareach now that I need worry about, and we'll go there in style."

He turned his head and grinned at me.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to have a word with that inspector to-morrow morning," he added. "You might tell him where that stout bird of ours is to be found, only make it clear that he's got to be kept under lock and key until you give the word."

We were passing along the High Street, with its rows of lighted lamps, and I saw Blenkers' face.

If ever a man looked happy, Blenkers was that man. I had never really doubted him, but the boyish, eager light on the face now would have banished any lingering suspicions that might have clung to him.

Blenkers and I had got to know each other that day.

CHAPTER 2.

Blenkers Make a Lot of Appointments and Dresses for a Strange One—What Happened in the Dawn—I Assist in Perpetrating a Crime.

IT was not much after nine o'clock next morning when Blenkers knocked at my bedroom, and came with a ebony smile on his face. He went across to the window and threw back the curtains, revealing the fact that the usual fog from the sea was spreading like a cloud over the cliff.

"Do you know that there was an old chap last Sunday who told me that we would have a bit of a mist either to-day or Friday," he said. "I reckon he must have been some weather prophet, for he was quite right."

He looked out of the window, rubbing his long hands together.

Now the average individual has no time for a fog, and I pointed that out to Blenkers.

"That is all right," he returned. "I guess I like this fog. It's a real clammy fellow, and I hope it gets its toes well into here and hangs on all day."

I went off for my bath, and later on joined Blenkers in the breakfast-room of the hotel. I had already made inquiries about Lawless and Tinker, and heard that they had left the hotel on the day after I started for the island. I judged from that that they had obeyed my suggestions, and they were now in quarters somewhere around Melton's Mill. But there had been big developments since I sent that message, and I was more than half inclined to set off and look for them. It did not seem nearly so important that they should keep in touch with Sedgill now, as it had done when I sent this message.

I was of the opinion that Blenkers would prove the more fruitful source when it came to settling the fate of the Gorrings Museum stuff.

After breakfast Blenkers and I walked down into the town, and at his suggestion I slipped into the police-station and had a word with my friend, the inspector. I told him where the farm was, and how he would find my man.

"You can tell him that he has been arrested on suspicion of being implicated in the Gorrings Museum robbery," I said to the inspector. "And by Saturday you will have all the evidence you want."

"I'll take your word for it, in any case, Mr. Blake," he said.

I found Blenkers waiting for me outside, and it seemed to me that he had taken another sort of madness that day. He went first to a tailor and was measured for a suit of clothes, telling the man he would call again on the following morning. From the tailor's he went into a stationer's and ordered some cards, that were also to be delivered to him next day. His next call was at the local theatre, where he booked a couple of stalls for the following night's performance, and, finally, in the afternoon, he stalked into the town clerk's office and asked that worthy gentleman to supply him with a list of likely properties for sale in the neighbourhood.

"I'll look in for them to-morrow afternoon," he said. "You won't forget my name—Blenkers."

The town-clerk was a fussy little man, and he looked at my eccentric companion through his eyeglasses.

"I am not very likely to forget you, Mr. Blenkers," he said severely, in his stiff, prim English. "You have already noticed you in the town; you are, shall we say, rather conspicuous."

He was really trying to convey to Blenkers that his style of hair-cut and beard-trimming was not the usual method. But that little lecture simply slid over Blenkers like water over a duck.

"I like to be taken notice of, sir," the lean man drawled.

When we were out in the street again I called a halt.

"Look here," I said, "we've been mooning round this town fixing up appointments all day. I don't know what is at the back of the scheme, but you are going to be a very busy man to-morrow if you keep all these fixtures that you've made."

He gave me one of his quizzical glances. "I should have to be more than a busy man if I keep all these appointments, Blake," he returned. "In fact, I should be glad if I could only manage to keep one of them."

"Then, if you don't mean to keep them, why make them?" I demanded.

He smiled slowly. "Didn't I tell you that I'm always running ahead of myself—getting well in front, so that I can look back and see how I'm getting on?" he returned. "Well, that is what I'm doing now."

It was a nonsensical sort of speech, but I could see that there was some reasoning behind it, and it made me all the more eager to get down to what Blenkins was aiming at. He had given me a few hints now and again, but his main plans were still up his sleeve.

All I knew at the moment was that he had made a dead set on Vanley, and had done so because of the Gorrings Museum case. He had handled that crook like a master, and it certainly looked as though he was going to win out when the big trial came.

But I did not dream what that big trial was to be.

Just before dinner that evening Blenkins came into my room again.

"I'm going to leave the hotel to-night," he said. "And I want you to pick me up to-morrow morning—early, if you will. You'll have to get the car out and fetch it along."

"Where am I to pick you up?"

He pulled out a sheet of paper. He had drawn a rough road-map on it, and he indicated a small cross on one of the roads.

"I'll be waiting there as soon as it is dawn," he said. "It is the cross roads on the moors, the one on the left leads to the prison and the other goes on down to Nelson's Mill."

His eyes searched mine for a moment. "If you will do this for me you'll have to get there up to time," he went on slowly. "Every minute will make a difference. There is bound to be a bit of a mist, and it will mean slow driving. Will you do it for me, Blake?"

There was a deep, earnest entreaty in the voice that I could not withstand.

"Of course I will," I returned. "But you must admit that you are keeping me well in the dark, and that makes it difficult for me."

He straightened his shoulders.

"I promise that you will know everything to-morrow morning," he said. "I would tell you now, but I am afraid that you might try to persuade me to give up the—the plan that I have set my mind on. That is why I keep silent—for to-morrow it will be too late to turn back, even if I did get cold feet."

After dinner I heard Blenkins tell the

manager that he was going across to Sandhrea that night and would not return until the following morning.

"Mr. Blake has promised to run across and pick me up in the car," he said.

The manager gave me a rather wondering look for, of course, he knew what I was and he had also been made aware of the manner of man that Vanley was. It must have struck him as being rather curious that I should be on such friendly terms with Blenkins, Vanley's companion, but I wasn't out to explain things.

Blenkers cleared off then, and I did not see him again, but between nine and ten o'clock I had a visitor in the form of the Search inspector, and his news gave me rather a shock.

"Are you sure that it was Discombe Farm, Mr. Blake?"

"Quite," I returned.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I've just had a report through from the police-sergeant at Mellon's Mill police-station," he said. "They have searched every corner of Discombe Farm, but there was no sign of anyone there."

This was certainly an alarming item of information, for if Sam had managed to get away he might very likely spoil Blenkins's plans. But as Blenkins had gone off without telling me where to find him, I could not see much chance of warning him at the moment.

"They have searched very carefully," the inspector added. "I phoned to them at once, and they've been there pretty well all day. They state that there were signs that someone had been occupying one of the bedrooms, but whoever it was he had vanished before they started to search."

It was certainly disquieting news, and it gave me food for thought for the rest of the night.

Sam's escape seemed to me to be an element of danger—one of these small mishaps that often wreck the best of plans. Before I went to sleep I had made up my mind on one thing. I determined not to tell Blenkins the news about Sam until I found out what scheme the lean American was going to work. If Sam's escape threatened that scheme, then it seemed to be up to me to step in and prevent Sam from doing any harm. If I couldn't help Blenkins I could at least take care that the hulking rascal did not intervene.

I had asked the boots to give me a call at four o'clock, and he did so. It was not quite dawn when I ran the car out of the garage and drove it through Search and up on to the moors. Blenkins had been right about the mist. It was very thick in parts like swathes of grey wool lying across the wet gorse. I had to go very slowly and keep my eye out for the road, following it by the rough map that Blenkins had given me. It must have been after half-past five before I reached the cross-roads. A tall figure in a long grey cloak arose from the heap of stones under the finger-post as I came up.

"Bravo, Blake," said Blenkins, as he

came forward to the car. "Just up to time."

I leaned forward and opened the front-door for him to step in. As he swung his long leg up I caught sight of a thick boot, grey stockings, and a short length of trousers—of a shade and stuff that was unmistakable.

Under his long cloak Blenkers was wearing the uniform of a lifer—a long-term convict!

He caught my look and he scrambled hurriedly into the seat, tucking the long cloak round his knees to hide his curious get-up.

"Just drive slowly along this road, Blake," he said, in a low tone. "I will tell you where to stop, and I'll explain as we go."

I started the car forward and gave him a quick glance.

"Explain away, Mr. Blenkers," I said.

He pointed out towards the mists.

"In that prison is a young brother of mine," he began, and his voice had deepened into an intense low monotone. "He was placed there three years ago, and has a life-sentence to serve for a crime he never committed."

He looked at me.

"Ralph was the third man in the case," he went on. "The man whom the other two were supposed to 'round' on. But it was all a trumped-up job from beginning to end. The brain behind the trick was Vanley's. It was that scoundrel who laid the trap for my brother."

I sat still, guiding the car slowly and listening to him. I knew that I was hearing the full story at last.

"Ralph was always a wild stick, but there was no sort of crime could ever figure in his plans," Blenkers went on. "About four years ago he got into trouble at Harvard and had to cut out. My father was alive then, and he was hard on Ralph, too hard. I have always thought, for he forsoke him the house and made him live in 'Frisco on an allowance."

He shook his head and was silent for a moment.

"Of course, he got into bad company," he said, half to himself. "What else could anyone expect from a youngster just turned twenty? Vanley and that sort of scum always finds these young 'uns to shape to their purpose, and that is what happened to Ralph. He and Vanley came across to England together and took a flat in London to live. Ralph knew that Vanley was a card-sharper, but that was all. One night they had a quarrel because Vanley wanted to dope a young Guardsman who was flashing his money about at a gambling-hell, and Ralph wouldn't stand for that. He found out afterwards that Vanley never forgave him and was his enemy from that moment."

Blenkers laid one hand on my arm.

"My father died while Ralph was in England, and Ralph did not hear of that until he was in prison," he said. "Had he known it might have saved him from his fate, for he knew that I was always his brother and his friend. But the boy had all the pride of the Southern-folk, and he held his tongue.

He passed under the name of Dalverry—that was the name of our old cotton estates."

Another moment of silence, then he went on:

"The Gorrings Museum affair was a scheme arranged by Vanley and the rascal Sedgill. Sedgill had his own tool, who was the other 'informer,' and my brother was trapped into the net by Vanley. He went to the Museum that night with Sedgill and the other man, but they had bluffed him into believing that the old curator was a friend of theirs, and had asked them to call. My brother and Vanley had been to the Museum several times—that fact came out in the evidence, but Vanley's name wasn't mentioned—and Ralph had chatted once or twice with the curator. You know that the Gorrings Museum is situated in a very lonely square in Kensington? Well, Ralph and these other two went into it by the side-door, and Sedgill had a key, which made Ralph believe that the visit had been arranged by the curator. The two rascals left him to wait for them in the passage while they went on to see the curator and fix up about Ralph. But after waiting about half an hour my brother got scared and slipped out of the building, going back to Vanley's flat. Vanley never turned up at that flat again, but three days later my brother was arrested, along with the other two rogues."

While he was talking Blenkers was keeping his eyes fixed on the misty road, and suddenly he held up his hand.

"We had better stop here for a moment, Blake," he said.

I halted the car and he went on with his story.

"My brother saw at once the trap, but his fool's pride kept him silent in the court. To clear himself he would have had to state who he was, and that meant that all his family would know the truth. He had been associating with crooks and rogue, and he would rather have died than let that fact go back to us."

The lean face softened.

"So he just stood up in that British prisoner's dock and allowed his life and his liberty to be sworn away by these two fiends," he added. "They knew that they would receive lighter sentences, and Ralph knew that Sedgill was the man who had collared the swag and had hidden it. That swag was to remain in hiding until Sedgill and his companion had served their sentences and were released again. Then Vanley and they were to divide the booty, or the result of it, for the stout ruffian Sam, who was Sedgill's go-between, was to have the selling of the stuff. Sam had been employed at the Gorrings Museum as door-keeper, and it was he who attacked the curator and was really responsible for his death. Vanley had never met Sam but, as I explained to you, he got that message at 'Frisco, the message that I read, making an appointment here at Searoach."

I opened my lips for the first time then.

"But how did you manage to find out all this?" I asked.

"Ralph told his story to a man who was

released two months after the boy came to this goal," said Blenkers. "That man came out and told me the whole yarn, and I set to work at once on it. I had detectives working all over the States, and they soon helped me to get in touch with Vanley. I have pieced together the rest of the evidence, bit by bit, and now I'm out to make the final move."

He turned and eyed me for a moment.

"My brother knows Sedgill and the other man, and I don't," he said slowly. "I knew that if once Sedgill slipped away from Mellon's Mill I might never be able to find him again. The only one who could recognise him at once was the luckless lad that he had trapped. And so—and so, Mr. Blake, I am going to take my brother's place in that prison."

I dropped back against the seat and stared at him.

"Going to take your brother's place?" I repeated.

"Yes. It is the only way, and I have been preparing for it for over eighteen months."

He drew off his cap, revealing the prison-crop.

"Do you think that I would have walked about like this, an object of ridicule and alarm to everyone, if I did not have a reason behind it?" the cool voice went on. "Don't you see what it really meant? I wanted to get people used to the sight of Mr. Blenkers strolling about in his prison-crop and stubble-covered chin, so that when my brother steps into my shoes, they would not notice any difference. For he is only two years younger than I am, and I saw him when I first came to England, saw him working on the sand-pits over there."

He pointed into the mists, and a grim look came into his eyes.

"I was in a car and muffled up and goggled so that no one could see the resemblance," he said. "But I recognised poor old Ralph, and he knew me."

"Knew you?" I put in.

Blenkers nodded.

"I've had several messages taken to him, and he has sent some to me," he returned. "Even your splendid British prisons are not immaculate, sir. Money had a way of working through the thickest walls that man ever built to hold the innocent behind."

There was a fine light in his eyes as he spoke.

"Yes," he said. "Ralph knows, and is ready. Last Sunday I went out on my hike and sent him a message, and again when you and I were on the moors on Wednesday night. I sent him another message—the three signals meant that everything was ready—and that little bit of magnesium wire that he lighted and dropped out of the ventilator of his cell was the answer."

He smiled grimly.

"Six inches of magnesium wire can be rolled in a very tiny ball, Mr. Blake," he said, "and even a few matches can hide beneath a pinch of sand in a pit, and can be found easily enough if a man knows where to look."

It was rather a peculiar position for me to

be in. Here I was, a fairly well-known detective, and one whom the police had every trust in, sitting beside a man in convict kit, listening to a very candid account of how he had contrived to break the rules and regulations of His Majesty's prisons.

More than that, Blenkers was out to help a convicted felon to escape, and apparently I had also to play a part in that deed.

"Your signals meant that everything was ready—for what?" I said.

Blenkers drew a deep breath.

"For an exchange of identities," he returned slowly. "After all, I know that I am the dead image of my brother, in build and face and height. The years he has spent in prison, in fact, has made him look rather the older of the two, but apart from that I will pass muster. Look!"

He turned back the flap of his convict jacket. There was a number printed on it. Stockings and boots all bore that same number, and the whole kit had that worn look which suggested much use.

"That is Ralph's number," said this man, who seemed to have omitted no detail.

"Even to the shirt I am wearing. It took me three months to get all this kit ready, Blake. I had them made in different parts of London, and I got the figures exactly of the stamps used over there."

He leaned back for a moment and smiled.

"After all, one man is as good as another, and one convict ought to be as good as another convict," he added.

The crazy notion that filled his mind was evidently not to be removed by anything that I could say. And I realised now why Blenkers had not made a clean breast of his enterprise before. Had he fired off his scheme to me in the hotel on the previous night I would certainly never have agreed to it.

But out on the moors, in the cold mists with the fellow actually sitting by my side in his convict garb, ready for an immediate start, there was no good of attempting to argue.

"But have you reasoned out what may happen if your brother fails to trap Sedgill, if he fails to prove that the rogue knows where the swag is hidden?"

The long, lean face turned to me, and the twinkling eyes went steady for a moment.

"Yes, I have reckoned with that," said Blenkers, in a slow tone. "It just means that I stay there until the end."

"You would serve the sentence, your brother's sentence?"

"Ralph never had a chance, sir," came the quiet reply. "I was his elder brother, and I guess one day the question might have been asked of me: 'What hath become of thy brother?'"

The deep reverential tone quietened me. I had a vision then of the real soul of this man, and it was white and clean. I found my hand outstretched and Blenkers gripping it, with that queer smile of his twisting his long, ugly face.

"But Ralph isn't going to fail with you by his elbow to help him, sir," said Blenkers.

"You've done bigger things in your time, but you'll never do a better deed than what lies before you now."

From the mists there came a sudden note, the tolling of a bell, and a thrill ran through my companion.

"That means that the gates have been opened and the working parties are marching to their tasks," he whispered. "Move the car on again, and I'll tell you where to halt."

"I admit that I shared his excitement then. A man would have had to be very thin-blooded not to feel a rising of the pulse at that moment."

For the scheme, even although it had been planned so carefully, seemed mad enough on the face of it. How could Blenkers hope to carry out his trick under the very nose of the armed warders that guarded each group of convicts? How was his brother Ralph to get away?

"Stop now!"

I halted the car, allowing the engine to tick over slowly. Blenkers slipped from his seat, leaving the door open.

"He'll come back in this coat," he whispered. "As soon as he gets in just drive off slowly. Good-bye!"

"Good luck!" I said.

"What else could I say?"

I watched the tall cloaked figure stalk across the wet turf, and the mist swirling around it now hid it from view, then revealed it again. Where a thick clump of gorse stood out golden and ghostly against the mist the figure of Blenkers dipped and vanished.

Then began a long, long wait.

Presently I heard the tramping of feet and a hoarse voice barked out an order. It came from the hollow beyond the gorse, and I realised that it was on the edge of the sandpit that the gorse-bush grew. Blenkers had picked out his spot very carefully.

Little noises came to me as I sat there listening intently, my hands on the steering-wheel. Now and again someone would beat their hands on their chests, for the sea mists were chill enough; then I would hear the creak of a barrow as one of the gang trundled it forward.

Suddenly I heard an angry command rapped out quite close at hand. There was a scuffling in the fog, and I thought I saw two figures appear for a moment on the right of the bush, but it was hard to be sure of anything in that wretched fog, and they vanished as soon as they appeared.

To my mind it is the man who watches a game that gets the most excitement out of it; those actually taking part are much too interested in the game themselves to really feel the thrill. The proof of that was when quite suddenly a lanky figure came slipping across the road and clambered into the car. I was only too glad to start the four-seater off with a jerk that flung the tall man back into the seat. I thought I heard voices behind me, but I did not look back, and in a few moments the car was rushing down the moor-road, and I let her go at full speed for the best part of a mile.

We ran into a part where the mist had practically cleared. I looked round at my companion and saw that he was leaning back with his cap drawn well down over his eyes.

"I knew that you didn't stand a ghost of a chance, Blenkers," I said. "It was a fool-hardy risk to take in any case. Our English prisoners are not so easily helped to escape as you thought."

He turned and looked at me.

"I am Ralph. Mr. Blake," he said.

So the trick had been done!

I stared at the rugged, careworn face for some moments. The likeness was extraordinary, for the years that he had spent in prison had set their seal on this younger brother and, if anything, he looked the elder of the two.

"So you are Ralph, are you?" I repeated, rather fatuously.

He drew a deep breath.

"Just give me a moment," he said, and I noted how like his voice was to that of the plucky man who had taken his place. "I can't quite realise it yet. I want to think."

I could quite understand his feelings, and I allowed the car to run on for a long stretch, then presently he spoke again.

"There is one thing I want to ask you, sir," he said. "Do you—do you think that it was low-down of me to let my brother take my place in that terrible prison?"

Then before I could reply, he went on:

"He doesn't know what he is going to, and I do," he added. "There is a new governor there, and he has the making of a beast. He seems to have taken a dislike to me first time we met. I know that my brother will get into trouble, for the warden saw him walking down the sandpit, and that is not allowed. You are not allowed to break line, you know?"

"How did you work it?" I asked.

He explained. He knew that his brother would be in that gorse-bush, and under cover of the fog he crept up here and there. Blenkers gave Ralph his long cloak and waited till the latter had donned it. He told Ralph what to do when he joined me, where to find the clothes that Blenkers had taken off when he dressed in the convict garb; the appointments that he had made. Every detail that he could think of the cool elder brother gave in those brief moments.

But when Blenkers came to slip down the sandpit to join the working-party, the eagle-eyed warden had caught sight of him, and had rushed towards him. Fortunately Blenkers kept his wits about him, and Ralph had listened to his brother's explanation.

"He told the warden, as cool as you please, that he'd felt a bit faint, and was trying to get some fresher air up there," Ralph ended, with a laugh that was half a sob.

I could almost picture the cool fellow drawing out the yarn, and the picture made me smile.

"Your brother has never shown himself to be lacking nerve," I said. "If it were any other man I might worry about him; but he is a man in a hundred."

My companion shook his head.

"You don't know what the life is like in

there, sir," he breathed. "It stifles you, frightens you. Even although I knew that my brother was working to help me, there were moments when I lost heart and wanted to be down and die."

He placed his hand on my arm.

"Did I do right to let him take my place?" he asked.

It was a difficult question to answer, but I saw that I had to do so. The prison life had taken a lot of the courage out of this man, and it was vital to the plans of the man who had taken his place that Ralph should tackle his share of the plans with full confidence in himself.

"I think you did," I said. "He has been working for you for over two years, and has carried the plan on as far as he could. But it was necessary that you should be free to complete the affair, and the only way to do that was the way he has taken."

The work-hardened fists clenched. I remembered how Blenkins had toughened his hands by hard work so that they might resemble those scarred, toil-worn palms.

"Yes, I've got to complete it; it is the only way of helping him," said Ralph.

"Exactly. You've got to put all you know into it now. You have a hard part to play, and a slip might mean failure. But I'll help you all I can."

Again the strangeness of my position struck me. I was actually promising to help an escaped convict to deceive the world, and I meant every word of it.

Time was passing quickly, and I realised that the sun would soon be strong enough to pierce the mists. I did not want anyone to meet me with a man in convict's garb by my side, and I asked Ralph for instructions. He gave me the directions that his brother had given to him, and presently we found the little spinney, in which, neatly folded in a valise, was Blenkins' clothes. I kept watch on the edge of the spinney while Ralph changed, and when he came out again in the light tweed suit it seemed as though the mere fact of his having got rid of the garb of shame had altered his whole outlook.

He was much cooler and confident now, and I fully appreciated the change. He had found a cigar-case full of cheroots in the valise, and had lighted one, and was puffing at it with that keen enjoyment that only a long abstinence from the fragrant weed can give.

"I've hurried the valise and the convict kit," he said to me. "May it be our luck never to have to dig it up again."

He gave me a quiet smile.

"My brother didn't have much time to spare, Mr. Blake," he went on, "but he managed to tell me what sort of man you are, and that I was to put myself under your orders. I do that right now."

His smile made a great difference to his face, and I could see that he was, after all, only a youngster, despite the haggard lines about the chin and eyes. It is always the innocent who suffer the most when wrongfully imprisoned. They fret, and their bonds chafe them, whereas the guilty know that it is, after all, only their due.

"I don't think I have any orders," I re-

turned, "except that you've got to remember that your name is Blenkins, that you are your brother. If you can hang on to that fact you won't go far wrong. And now I'm going to get back to the Imperial. You have a few oricals to face, and you might as well start now, for Sedgill doesn't get released until to-morrow, and that means one day still to pass."

We went back into the car and I headed for Searoach. It was after nine o'clock before we passed through the town and went on towards the hotel. Climbing the hill, who should call to us but the inspector. I managed to give a warning whisper to Ralph, and I must admit that he took his cue very well.

"No news of that fellow yet, Mr. Blake," the inspector said, after bestowing a curt nod on Ralph.

It was a gentle reminder of something that I had clean forgotten—the disappearance of the rascal, Sam.

"I'll probably run across to Mellon's Mill myself this afternoon," I said to the inspector. "Lord only knows where the scoundrel can have got to."

The inspector glanced again at Ralph.

"It is wonderful how these crooks manage to get fools to help 'em," he said drily.

He must have been rather taken aback at the blank way that Ralph took this hint; and it wasn't until we were moving on again that I could explain.

"The inspector was sore with you because he thought that you were your brother," I said. "Vanley was arrested for theft, and your brother batted in and saved him, much to the inspector's annoyance."

Ralph smiled.

"No wonder he told me off," he said.

"But it is a good augury, sir, for if I can pass as my brother in front of a policeman, I am not going to be scared of meeting anyone else."

"There is only one man that you've got to fear," I pointed out, "and that is the fellow Sam."

His eyes went hard.

"I know him," he said slowly. "I saw him with Sedgill once or twice. It was his place that I took in the prisoner's dock."

"Well, he has managed to get away from a pretty tight fix that your brother and I arranged for him," I explained. "If he meets you there might be trouble."

"But he met my brother, and was not able to recognise him," said Ralph slowly.

"That is easily explained. Your brother has been a friend of Vanley's for a long time, and always in that prison-crop," I pointed out. "I don't suppose Sam or Vanley ever saw you as you look now. I don't suppose that there is any resemblance between you as you were when the case was tried and your present appearance?"

He shook his head.

"My own mother wouldn't know me, sir," he said. "I was not so tall, and was much stouter. I must have grown three or four inches in gaol, and I lost all my fat. I'm as lean as they make 'em."

We had arrived at the hotel by now, and after stabling the car Ralph and I sauntered

into the lounge and went up to his brother's suite. I must admit that my companion played his part splendidly. The manager came up to us when we went in for late breakfast, and Ralph talked to him just as though he was really Blenkers, mentioning his trip to the other village on the previous evening.

"I booked a couple of stalls at the theatre for to-night," he said. "I wish you'd ring them up and tell them to send the tickets along."

He gave me a smile over the edge of his cup when the manager hustled away.

"I'm going to play up for all I'm worth," he breathed. "I—I want to get my brother out of there quick, and the better I play the sooner he'll be clear."

But neither of us knew what was waiting ahead for us, or we would not have been quite so confident.

For the plans of men depend so much on chance, that the slightest swerve from the straight, the smallest hitch, often piles up a mountain of trouble.

A fact that I know well enough, and was again to have full proof of.

CHAPTER 3.

An Awkward Encounter—A Rogue Shows his Teeth—Lawless Brings Some Bad News.

ON Friday afternoon I had to leave Ralph Blenkers for an hour or so. We had been out in town together, and he had duly kept all the appointments made by his brother, but I decided that it was better for him to keep out of the way as much as possible. His nerves were quite all right now, but there was always a chance of his being met by someone who might put some very awkward questions, and there was no need of running too many risks.

What we had to do was to lie as low as possible until Saturday morning, when the convict Sedgill was due for release. I had found out that the convicts were let out of the prison at about eight o'clock, after the working-parties had gone, and were allowed to go down to the railway-station at Melton's Mill by themselves.

I had taken advantage of the opportunity to give Ralph Blenkers a careful account of all that had happened to his brother at Searcach, so far as I knew. When I mentioned the incident on the golf-links with the man who was now governor of the prison, Ralph let drop a piece of information that was rather disquieting.

"That explains why he stopped and stared at me on the morning when he took over the prison," he said. "We were all drawn up in our gauges, and he walked down the lines, looking at us. He stopped in front of me, and stared so hard that I thought he was someone who had met me in America. He asked me my name, and I gave him the one I was serving my sentence under. He went on, but I saw him talking to the head-warder, and they glanced at me once or twice.

"No doubt he had noticed the resemblance between you and your brother," I returned. "That makes it rather awkward if you should meet him again. But I don't think you are likely to do that, and, even if you do, I think he will find the puzzle more than he will be able to solve."

Yet all these little points made me anxious that Ralph should keep out of the way as much as possible, and he promised to stay in the hotel until I returned.

It must have been about three o'clock when I entered Searcach. My object in going down there was really to try and get some traces of Sam. It seemed to me that there was more danger from that direction than any other.

The fellow had got away from Discombe Farm, and he could give us a heap of trouble if he liked.

My first place of call was the police-station, which was a rather fortunate choice, for it helped me to save a lot of time. The station-sergeant knew me, and came forward when I entered.

"The inspector has got some news for you, Mr. Blake," he said. "I think you will find him down on the quay, in the harbourmaster's office. Perhaps you will go down there now?"

"What is the news?" I asked.

The sergeant smiled.

"I think he's found traces of that man who you wanted arrested," he said. "The inspector has been sticking to that job all day; he wanted to help you, if he could, Mr. Blake."

That was good news in its way, but there was a danger of the inspector finding out more than I wanted him to do. I decided to follow the sergeant's advice, and I headed for the harbourmaster's office at once.

I found the inspector just leaving the place, but he turned when he saw me, and we went back into the office again.

"This is Mr. Blake, of London, Mr. Martin," the inspector said, introducing me to the ruddy-checked old chap in the office.

The harbourmaster shook hands with me.

"I've heard about you, sir," he said, "and I'm very glad to meet you. It seems to me that I've been helping a rascal, and I thought he was a friend of yours."

"Indeed! How was that?"

The harbourmaster nodded to the inspector. "The inspector tells me that you are looking for a beefy, bullet-headed man who you want for some crime. Well, sir, that man came down to the office here early yesterday morning with another man, and gave me one of your cards, and took that motor-launch out!"

"Took the motor-launch?" I repeated.

"Yes, sir. You had hired it for a week, and the men from Maulbers brought it in yesterday afternoon and handed it over to me, saying that you would communicate with me later on."

Now this was just what I had ordered the men from Maulbers to do. They had brought round the big sea-going launch, and also the Swallow, and had handed them over to the care of the harbourmaster.

"You say that this stout rascal had one of my cards?"

The harbourmaster slipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew a card.

"Here it is, sir," he said.

There was no doubt about it. By some mysterious means Sam had gained possession of one of my business-cards, and had made good use of it.

There was no use of puzzling over that fact then; I had enough to do to find out what the rascal had done with the launch.

"He got the tanks filled up—there was another fellow with him—and they loaded the launch up in quick time," the harbourmaster went on. "They must have left here between eight and nine o'clock."

"Which way did they go?"

I had a grim foreboding as I asked the question.

"They steered south-east, Mr. Blake," the harbourmaster said, "right out to sea."

In other words, the launch had shaped a course straight for Dobbin Island!

And it had started off on the previous day, and I knew that, taking a direct route, that launch could reach the island well inside the twelve hours.

So that meant that Sam and Vanley were probably on their way back to Searach, if they had not actually reached the mainland by now.

It was most disconcerting, for it seemed to pile up the trouble. With Vanley and Sam let loose, our chances of coloring Sedgill were made increasingly difficult.

"I don't suppose the rascal would risk coming straight back to Searach, Mr. Blake," the inspector suggested. "He would probably make for some other point on the coast. He would know you were after him, and he has had one taste of what you can do."

But I was not so sure of that. I knew what lay behind this move. There was a fortune at stake, a fortune that these two rascals had waited three long years for, and I knew that Vanley, at least, was not the type who would throw in his cards without a fight.

"You might wire all along the coast," I said to the inspector. "We would then find out if the motor-launch had turned up anywhere."

The inspector turned to the harbourmaster. "Why not use your telephone, Mr. Martin," he said. "We could cover a fair stretch by it."

The harbourmaster had a special telephone connected with the coastguard stations and other towns up and down the coastline. He went to the phone at once and began to call up the various stations. Twenty minutes of this work located the launch.

"Elvery's Cove, eh! All right. Thanks very much."

The harbourmaster looked up at me.

"There is a deserted motor-launch stranded on the beach at Elvery's Cove," he said. "That is only about five miles from here. It is almost under the first tee at the golf-links on the cliffs."

"I suppose it is the launch?" I put in, not doubting very much.

"I've been on to the coastguard who found it," he said. "It is one of the Admiralty type, and is registered at Searach. The coastguard was just going to take charge of it and bring it round here, but there was no petrol left in the tanks, and he was sending away for some."

That settled the doubt, if there had been any, and I turned to the inspector.

"I think I will go round to Elvery's Cove," I said. "You can tell the coastguard to keep the launch there until I get round."

"The best way is up the road to the golf-links, Mr. Blake," the inspector said. "There is a pathway down to the cove that leads right up to the road immediately opposite the club-house. You cannot mistake it."

"Thanks," I said.

We left the harbourmaster's office, and presently I was walking along the road towards the links. I had a grim suspicion that something was going to happen. Sam and Vanley were both free and on the move again, while the man who had bluffed them and handled them so well was now behind prison-walls. It was up to me to take his place and do the best I could for him, but there were certain factors in the case that made my position much harder than his had been. Neither Vanley nor Sam had suspected Blenkins while he was playing against them, but that was certainly not the case where I was concerned. Both Vanley and Sam knew now just what Blenkins was after, and they would leave no stone unturned to beat him, if they could.

I climbed the last slope to the golf-links, and as I reached the gates that led to the club-house I recognised the car that I had hired at Maulthers standing on the left of the fence!

I had left the car in the garage at the Imperial, and was rather taken aback to see it there; but I had no suspicion of the real truth until I suddenly caught sight of a knot of figures standing under the verandah of the club-house.

Among them was the tall figure of Ralph Blenkins, and facing him, with a very red face, was a thick-set man who seemed to be making some sort of accusation against the tall American.

I hurried through the gate, and as I drew nearer to the group one of the men who had his back to me turned round. It was Vanley!

I admit that, although my nerves are as good as they make them, the sight of that scarred, evil face gave me a bit of a shock. But I know how to control my features, and I kept a calm countenance as I went up to the knot of men. There were eight or nine of them, most of them from the Imperial, and, with the exception of Ralph Blenkins, Vanley, and the red-faced man, they all wore that uncomfortable look which the average Englishman adopts when there is a scene that is not to his liking.

Over the heads of the group I caught a look from Ralph. He was rather pale, but his eyes were steady enough, and there was a warning in them that I could not mistake.

He was telling me to be on my guard, but I did not need that hint.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Blenkens," I said. "What are you arranging, another of your matches?"

Vanley started, and turned to look at me. He was plainly disconcerted to find me at his elbow.

The thick-set, red-faced man wheeled on me.

"Mr. Blenkens is not arranging a match, but trying to answer a question that I have put to him," he snapped.

Ralph nodded to me.

"You don't know this gentleman, Mr. Blake," he said. "I forget his name now, but he is the governor of the local prison. I played golf with him last week-end, but he is trying to make out that he has seen me since then, and we're a bit hazy about the date of that meeting."

He looked at the red-faced man coolly.

"Mr. Blake is a famous detective," he said. "Perhaps you have heard of him, sir."

I could see that the governor had heard my name, for his manner changed slightly. I happen to be in the good books of the Home Office, and that makes a lot of difference to men who get their employment through that famous department.

"Are you Sexton Blake?" the governor demanded.

I bowed.

"That is my name, sir," I said.

I saw him bite the ends of his moustache for a moment. I could see the manner of man he was—quick-tempered and inclined to be a bully if he got the chance.

Ralph Blenkens was going to make full use of me then. He leaned forward.

"This gentleman is of the opinion that I am one of his prisoners," he said. "He sort of thinks that I've just escaped from his charge. He didn't have that notion last week-end, when he played golf with me—but he's changed it since then."

The governor scowled. He was staring hard at Ralph.

"I am not alone in that opinion, Mr. Blake," he snapped. "This gentleman on my right is also of the opinion that your friend is not what he seems to be?"

He indicated Vanley, and I saw the crook's face harden. He had been studying Ralph, and his quick, criminal brain had come very near to solving the problem. For no man is absolutely like another man, no matter how near nature may have gone in the fashioning of the two. There are little tricks, small mannerisms, that a man acquires in his life which a close observer can pick out. Vanley had been with the elder brother for a long time, both in America and England. I could see that he had sensed the difference between the two brothers, but for the rest he was in a fog.

"I say that this man is not Blenkens," Vanley snarled. "And the governor of the prison recognises him as one of his convicts, so that means that the real Blenkens has been got out of the way, and this man is masquerading in his place."

I turned to the governor.

"You are making a very serious accusation, sir," I said. "If you claim my friend as being an escaped convict, you will have

to bring some sort of proofs. When did he escape from your custody?"

The red-faced man shook his head.

"I left the prison this morning early," he said hurriedly. "I have been at the golf-club all day. If this man is the fellow I think he is, then he must have escaped since I left."

I saw Vanley's eyes fixed on Ralph with a hungry expression. The crook's brow was twisted into a furrow of thought, and I began to feel afraid that Vanley would guess the truth.

He had met Ralph in the old days, three years ago, and although the prison life had altered Ralph a great deal, I could see in Vanley's face that he was on the brink of solving the problem.

If he gave the governor the real clue to the mystery, it would be all up with Blenkens and his brother, for, brought face to face with each other, there would be no difficulty in establishing the dual identities.

There was only one thing to be done.

I had to quieten Vanley in some way or other, so that he might think himself safe to go on with the real business that had brought him to Seareach.

To do that I had to play a part that was rather painful, but very necessary.

"Perhaps this man is right, sir," I said, turning to the governor. "I know that Mr. Blenkens vanished from the hotel last night, and did not turn up again."

I had one glimpse of Ralph's face, and the consternation that spread across it was not lost on the watchers. Vanley gave vent to a hoarse chuckle, and nodded towards Ralph.

"Then that proves that you've been telling lies," he snarled. "For you told us just now that you had been in the company of Mr. Blake all day yesterday and to-day."

The governor turned to me.

"That is what this man did say," he chimed in. "Is it true?"

I would have given anything to have been able to whisper just one word to Ralph Blenkens. He had drawn himself up stiff and rigid, and was looking at me with deep-set, blazing eyes. If ever scorn and amazement and disgust fell on a man they fell on me that moment from the escaped convict.

But I was out to play a part and to save him, and I kept control of my features well enough.

"I'm afraid it is not true," I said. "I have not set eyes on Mr. Blenkens for the past two days until I saw him here."

The red-faced man laughed harshly.

"Then in that case I think I am justified in sending for the police and having him locked up," he said. "There is something distinctly fishy about his story, and it demands investigation. What is your opinion, Mr. Blake?"

I pretended to hesitate.

"Well, sir, under the circumstances, I think you are perfectly justified," I said. "Mr. Blenkens has brought this on himself by making a false statement with regard to my association with him. If he cares to explain that—he has his opportunity."

I could feel Ralph's eyes on me, but I dared not look at him. Vanley was between

us, and I knew that the crook was as alert as a ferret. I was taking a big chance now, and did not want it spoiled.

If Ralph Blenkers was arrested and taken to the police-station that would allow Vanley to think that he had a clear field for his meeting with Sedgill in the morning. And that was just what I wanted him to think.

"You hear what Mr. Blake says, sir," the governor snapped out. "Have you anything to say in return?"

I don't think that cold scorn ever sounded so clearly and deadly as it did from Ralph Blenkers then.

"Mr. Blake is a gentleman, and his word must be taken, I suppose," he drawled. "Therefore, I have nothing to say."

I could see that the governor was hugging himself with satisfaction, and I knew why. He had not forgotten that trouncing which the other Blenkers had given him—indeed, it was the memory of that incident that had made him so fierce and vindictive in his attitude.

"Very well, sir," he said. "Then, in my official capacity as governor of the prison, I arrest you in the name of the law!"

He turned to a worried-looking man on his left.

"You are the secretary of the club, I believe. I must ask you to send a messenger down to the police-station at once, and you will see to it that this man is kept in custody until he is handed over."

The group melted like magic, and I saw Ralph turn to the secretary and bow.

"It is a nasty job for you, sir," he said quietly. "But I will give you no sort of trouble. Just show me where I have to wait."

Then, without another glance at us, the tall man walked off with the secretary, and I turned and nodded to the governor.

"I am staying at the Imperial," I said. "If you want to find me, you can send me a message."

He bowed, and I walked out towards the gates and turned towards Seareach, but at a bend in the road I slipped to the left and worked my way back below the level of the higher ground until I reached a group of boulders on the edge of the cliff. I could see the golf-house and also the path that led down to Elvery's Cove, and presently I picked out the figure of Vanley moving down the path at a quick pace.

The rogue had shown his teeth with a vengeance, and I heard afterwards how it had happened. He had gone to the golf-links and had sent a message down to the hotel addressed to Blenkers, asking him to come up there. He had not given any name, but Ralph, believing that I was the only one who could have sent the message, fell into the trap easily enough. I don't suppose that Vanley had figured on the prison governor's intervention in the affair. It is more than likely that the crook meant to watch his chance and waylay Blenkers as the latter returned from the links after discovering that the message was a hoax.

But the governor had come face to face with Ralph, and the startling likeness to the

convict he had stared at on his inspection-day had made the red-faced man blurt out an accusation. Vanley had heard that argument, and had hurried to take part in it, with the result already recorded. The rascal was not to be blamed for thinking that his scheme had worked better than he had even hoped. For he had got rid of the only man he feared, as he thought—the man who had left him a prisoner on Dobbin Island.

I watched the dim figure descending the path, then I arose at last and began to work my way along the cliff. It was getting late now, and the sun was beginning to set, with the result that already the seaward side of the cliffs were in deep shadow, thanks to the headland that arose on its west side.

As I gained the path I noticed that the petrol-launch was still high and dry on the beach, and I thought at first that Vanley was making for it, but I caught sight of him presently moving along the rough beach just under the shadow of the cliff. It was rather difficult stalking, but I managed to follow him without letting him know what was happening. He worked his way along the cliff, then turned up a slanting path at the end of the cove, and vanished.

I hurried forward then, and when I reached the top of the path I found that it led to a narrow road which ran along beside the boundary of the golf-course. Vanley was walking up this road, and I slipped into the ditch beside the fence of the course, and kept him in view. He must have covered the best part of three miles, and it was quite dark before he turned up a short path towards a clump of trees, and I saw a small cottage standing beyond the trees. There was a horse-and-trap tethered to the gatepost of the cottage, and Vanley turned through the gate and entered the little place without knocking. There was a light in the window on the right of the porch, and I made for it. Vaulting over the low fence, and crossing the patch of garden, I reached the window, but found that a thick blind was drawn, and I could not see inside the room, but presently I heard a voice that I recognised at once.

It was Sam's, and it seemed full of glee, for now and again a chuckle sounded.

I guessed what was going on in there. Vanley was telling his companion of the good luck that had followed his trick, and they were both gloating over the downfall of the man who had dished them up so badly.

But I could not hear what was being said, and I wanted to get nearer to them, for it was vital that I should discover something of their plans for the next morning. It was obvious that they would meet Sedgill, but I wanted to know how and where. The slightest slip now would mean failure, for if they got Sedgill away from Mellon's Mill it would be next to impossible to trace them in time to prevent the concealed swag being removed from its hiding-place and divided.

I turned and walked round, keeping close to the wall of the cottage. I hoped to find a back door that might let me gain an entry to the place, or at least let me hear what was being said.

But as I turned into the back garden a bulky figure arose from the ground and grabbed at me, and we went down into the soft mould gripping at each other.

I had not expected that little departure, and I was rather taken by surprise. I have a lot of little pocket tricks for dealing with an unexpected attack, and I began to work for a certain hold.

We were both quite silent, and the soft earth did not give us away to the inmates of the cottage. I could see that it was going to be a silent battle, and I did not object to that.

But suddenly I discovered that my tough opponent was trying for the very same lock that I was after.

I knew that there were only about three men in England who knew that lock. One of them is a Japanese wrestler, who works the music-halls, and I knew that Yamaguti could not, by any miraculous means, have got to Searach; so there was only the third man to consider, and I breathed his name.

"Let go, Lawless, you silly ass!" I whispered.

The powerful hands ceased their groping for that elbow-lock, and we both rolled away from each other, and lay for a long moment gasping for breath.

I heard the click of a latch, and made a move, but Lawless reached out and grabbed my arm.

"It is all right," he whispered. "Don't move. I know where they are going to—let them go."

I leaned on my elbow again, and listened. I heard the gravel on the front path crunch, then presently the wheels of the trap grating on the road came to me, and I had a glimpse of the dim lights of the vehicle as it passed along beside the end of the garden. I picked out the two figures of Vanley and Sam seated in the trap, and watched them until they dipped behind the hedge.

Lawless leaped to his feet and held out his hand to me.

"Of course, I might have known that it was you," he said, with that deep chuckle of his. "But I'd like to know how the blazes you managed to get here?"

I was dusting the soil from my clothes, and did not reply for a moment. It seemed to me that we both had explanations to make.

"I followed Vanley from the golf-course," I said. "He led me straight to here. But I'll swear that you were not on the same line."

"Of course not. I've been here since eight o'clock this morning," he replied, with a chuckle. "In fact, I've been with Vanley and that other skunk for this last thirty-six hours—a day and a half, in fact."

"You've been with them—but they must have recognised you."

Lawless turned towards the cottage. "Come into the light and have a look at me first," he chuckled. "My own mother wouldn't recognise me, I'll bet."

He went into the cottage through the back and I followed him. He struck a match and lighted the lamp, then turned towards me.

"Now, old man," he said, "what about it?"

It was a masterly disguise—the best that I have ever seen Lawless in. He is not really good at that game, but this occasion he fairly arose to it. He was dressed in a ragged, greasy suit that had been cast off by some railway fireman. He had not shaved for three days, and Lawless is the sort of man who has to shave twice a day, thanks to the hard, black growth that shadows his grim chin. His hair was plastered down over his forehead, and a torn peaked-cap completed his get-up, while he had stained his hands and face to a nigger-brown.

"Don't I look like a greaser out of a job?" he chuckled.

"You do, by James!" I said. "A greaser out of a job—and one that deserved to be out of a job, by the cut-throat look of you."

He sat on the table and swung his long legs.

"That is exactly what I wanted to look like," he went on. "I've had just about the dandiest adventure that ever man struck—and I've been working with the enemy all the time."

"Working with the enemy?" I cried.

He grinned.

"Yes. My name is Joe, and if anyone wants a certificate as to my character, well, Sam or Vanley will supply it. Just as they supplied this!"

He thrust his hand into a greasy pocket and fetched out a couple of bank-notes.

"Twenty pounds," he said. "That is what I earned—and there's more to follow. Blake, there is much more to follow!"

His keen eyes twinkled as they looked at me.

"I'm going to have a small share in a certain division of swag that is due to take place to-morrow afternoon, at a place that I think you have heard about—a little ramshackle farm called Discombe."

I stared at the big fellow in amazement. I could see that there had been other developments taking place, that while I had been following one line John Lawless had been hard at work on another. It seemed to me that our lines had got rather mixed up, and a sudden suspicion came to me.

"Tell me, Lawless," I broke out, "was it you who released Sam from his bonds—was it you who found him in Discombe Farm?"

That brought him to the ground with a leap.

"You—you know where he was, then?"

He could see what was coming, and I shrugged my shoulders.

"Blenkers and I worked like niggers for a long afternoon to collar the skunk," I returned drily. "We managed it at last, and left him safe and sound, tied to a cot in Discombe-Farm. Previous to that we had fixed up Vanley—we left him on Dohium Island, miles from anywhere, and without a snowball's chance of getting back again, until we thought fit to send for him."

Lawless's face was a study then. He simply stared at me with unblinking eyes for a moment, then a sense of the utter ridiculous-

ness of the position came to me, and I had to roar with laughter.

Not that there was much to laugh about, for the sudden return of Vanley had made a sad mess of all the plans that Blenkins had laid so carefully, but the humour of it tickled me, all the same.

"It was you, then, who released Sam?"

"Yes."

"And—you were the other man that went with Sam to Doblun Island in a big petrol-launch?"

Lawless nodded his head.

"We only got back this morning," he returned.

"Well, old man, that is just about the limit of anything that has ever happened, where you and I were concerned," I said. "For that launch was mine! I have been to Doblun Island and back again in it. And Blenkins came back with me, with his yacht in tow. We left Vanley there, because we wanted a clear field. But, by James, you seem to have filled that darned field again—filled it up, chock-a-block; and if you've got the story, I think you'd better tell it."

He leaned against the wall and rubbed his chin for a moment.

"It certainly looks as though I've made a hash of it," he returned. "But let me have your story first, and then I'll tell you mine."

I gave him the details, without omitting any single point. He listened in silence, then it seemed to me that his troubled expression vanished.

"Just one question, Blake," he said quietly. "You were going to meet this fellow Sedgill when he came out of prison; but how were you going to get him to show you where the swag was?"

He had put a rather stiff poser. Neither Blenkins nor myself nor his brother had been able to form a definite plan with regard to the handling of Sedgill. In fact, we had agreed to leave that until we were actually in touch with the man, for we were very much in the dark concerning him.

"We would have got it out of him some way or other?" I said.

The big fellow grinned.

"Then that is where I come in, and that is where I can prove to you that what I did—foolish though it may seem—is going to pan out best in the long run. For, believe me, without Sam and Vanley, you could never have found the booty, for Sedgill himself doesn't know where it is. He only knows where he hid it; and it is Sam who has to take him to the place first, otherwise Sedgill might spend all his life searching for the scene!"

He came towards me, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"We've been working at cross-purposes. But the trails join—the trails join, old man!" he said. "We can follow them together now—and we'll land at the right goal together."

Which was true prophecy. But I will leave the telling of how it came about to the man who really engineered it—and that was John Lawless.

End of Sexton Blake's Narrative.

Part III.

TOLD BY THE HONOURABLE JOHN LAWLESS.

CHAPTER 1.

In which the Release of Sam and Other Events are Shortly Described—A Night Adventure—We Pick Up Tinker, and Get a Shock.

I DON'T see why I should be called on to write all this stuff. I am not a detective, and most things that do happen to me just come along by sheer chance. The only clever ones in our party are Blake and Tinker. Sam and myself just hang on to their coat-tails, and sometimes get a bit of sport out of the process.

So if anyone reading this decides that I'm a bit of an ass—well, he won't be far out. And with that point clearly settled, I'll pitch into the yarn.

Mr. Blake had asked Tinker and I to cut along to Mellon's Mill and keep our eyes open for developments. He had also mentioned a name, Sedgill, the convict who was going to be released from the prison. But Tinker and I knew nothing at all about Sedgill beyond the fact that he was in some way connected with the case that Blake had been asked to take up again. And, of course, we hadn't the faintest notion where Blake had gone that day.

Still, we were out to do our bit, and next morning I got Sam and the car, and Tinker and I went off for a twenty miles run, finally halting at a town on the railway. I put the car in a garage, and fixed Sam in an hotel, with orders to wait there until Tinker I returned, then we two prepared for our journey to Mellon's Mill. The fireman hit idea was my own. I saw the suit in a dirty second-hand shop, and bought it just as it was, although the fellow who sold it to me wanted badly to give it a bit of a clean. Tinker made himself up to look like a young gypsy—coloured handkerchief, velvet coat, and gold earrings, and with a liberal application of walnut juice, and some heavy grease for his hair, he certainly fitted the part to a nicety.

We got into the train that afternoon and travelled to Mellon's Mill, where, after a bit of a search, we managed to find diggings. Now we had previously been round that quarter, and specially Discombe Farm, where we had lost trace of Sam on that motor-bike. I was anxious to visit the farm again, and I did so next morning, which was Wednesday. I got there about ten o'clock, and was just going to try and get through a window into the farmhouse, when I heard someone making a splashing noise, and whipped round in time to see Sam himself wading through the half-empty duck-pond towards me.

He was carrying a whacking great parcel, and he put it down and stared at me very hard for a moment. I was glad of that greasy snit then, for I knew that he would

hardly recognise me as the man who had chased him all over the moors on the previous day.

"What are you after, mate?" he asked.

"I worked up a grin.

"I thought that there might be something here that wanted an owner," I said. "I didn't know that there was anyone in charge."

"I knew that Sam put me down as someone whose morals were none too high, and I did not try to enlighten him.

"On the road, are you?" he said.

"Yes," said I.

He nodded to the parcel.

"Well, just hump that across for me, and I'll give you the chance to make a square meal," said Sam.

I picked up the parcel, and we went back to the farm. Sam opened the door at the back and went into the kitchen. I saw then that he had evidently been staying there on the previous night, for there were traces of fire in the grate, and the remains of a meal on the table.

"I'm tired out," he said, "and want a rest, and I also want something to eat," he went on. "If you can cook, you'd better get to work, and call me when it's ready."

He certainly looked tired out, for there were pouches under his eyes, and he was covered with dust. I guessed that that chase on the moors had pretty well knocked him up, and he must have trudged a long way with that parcel that morning, for when I opened it I saw the stuff had come from tradesmen in Searceach—and Searceach was a good eight miles away from Discombe Farm.

The stout rascal went off up the stairs, and I set to work to rekindle the fire and make a meal. He knew how to cater for himself, for he had bought some good bacon and a half-dozen eggs, besides a loaf and a big wedge of butter.

I set out the table, got a big jug of coffee ready, and fried the eggs and bacon, and I can tell you that I felt hungry enough at the end of the cooking. I gave Sam a shout, and he came down, rubbing his eyes.

It was rather a quaint situation to be in, but I enjoyed it all right. We sat opposite each other, and while he fasted the grub into his ugly mouth, Sam told me that I was a top-hole cook. I could see that he meant that, too, for he suddenly jerked out another proposition, that rather took my breath away.

"Look here, Joe," he said—I had told him that my name was Joe Binks—any old name did for me! "I reckon that you're a handy sort of fellow—and you and me might strike a bargain."

"I'm ready to strike anything, if there is money in it," I said.

He ehukled.

"And I don't suppose that you're too particular how that money comes, neither?" he said.

"You've hit it, first time. The more the merrier—and the easier the better, is my motto," I agreed.

He started on his third cup of coffee, and

between the gulps he let me know what he wanted.

"There's something going to happen in this place on Saturday that will make a lot of difference to me—and some others," he said. "You wouldn't think it, but I'm the owner of this place and the fifty acres round about."

"You don't look like a landed gent," I said.

"Maybe I do not—and I've never let anyone know that I do own it," he went on. "But it was left to me five years ago by the old chap who owned it. He was my uncle, and I hadn't clapped eyes on him for twenty years. I heard about it from a solicitor's clerk, who came looking for me. The old boy had left this farm four or five years before he died—and you can see the sort of state it was in. Nobody would buy it, and I didn't want it; but I have been down here once or twice, just to have a look at the place—and it came in handy at last."

He gave me a cunning glance.

"It's what's called a mixed farm," he said, with a chuckle. "There ain't been a harvest taken off it for ten years to my knowledge, but next Saturday we're going to lift a bumper, Joe. We're going to get a harvest from this old place that would make the biggest farmer in England open his eyes—a harvest that is worth at least forty thousand pounds."

I didn't have to affect surprise, the look was quite natural.

"You're kidding me," I said. "This whole hinkin' farm ain't worth that."

"No more it ain't; but that's the value of the crop that was sowed here three years ago—and that crop is as valuable to-day as it was then, and it's much safer to harvest."

I realized at once what he was hinting at. The proceeds of the Gorrige robbery were hidden somewhere on this tumbledown, derelict farmstead.

"But why wait till Saturday, mate?" I said. "If I'd a harvest like that waiting for me, I'd start digging it up now."

Sam laughed.

"So would I—if I knewed where it was," he said. "But the bloke who sowed the crop sowed it when there was no one here but himself," he went on. "Sowed it so that no one would find it until he was ready to come and help dig it up."

I was beginning to pick up the meaning clearer now. On Saturday the convict Sedgill—the man who had served his time—would be set free. There was little doubt in my mind but what Sedgill was the man who had hidden the swag, kept it whereabouts a secret until he was free to come out and share in the division of the plunder.

"But how do you know that he ain't been here already and lifted this hinkin' harvest?" I asked.

Sam laughed.

"Because he hasn't had a chance to do that; and he don't know where this place is," he went on.

He could see that I was a little bewildered, and, desiring no doubt to impress me with his cleverness, he explained.

"The bloke who had the crop to sow came down with me one night, in a motor-car," he explained. "It was dark, when he got here, and dark when he left. He knows where to find his harvest, provided I brings him here; but if I didn't bring him here, he would have to search all England—and then he wouldn't find it."

His ugly face twisted into a smile.

"And the joke of the whole blinking thing is that he's been living for the last three years not more than five miles from this very place. He could even see it from where he lives; but he don't know that it is the place where he hurried his—grain."

Of course, Sam thought that he was simply mystifying a stranger—one of his own kidney. But to me his words were full of meaning. I could even see why Sedgill had entered into the compact. He and Sam were partners in the crime, and Sam had chosen the spot where the swag should be hidden, while Sedgill actually hid the swag. Each would have to rely on the other before the stuff could be recovered.

I could even see why Sedgill had allowed Sam to go free while he did his sentence. For Sam was the one who could act as go-between when it came to Vanley's share in the affair, and he could also watch the place where the stuff had been hidden, although he did not know the exact hiding-place.

The whole arrangement seemed to me to be the plan of a very clever brain, for it allowed each of the rogues to rest content during the interval of waiting. I could almost see Vanley's hand in that, and, as it turned out, I was not mistaken. It was Vanley who had made the suggestion which Sam and Sedgill had carried out.

"Well, all I can say is that I'd like to be giving a hand with that harvest," I went on presently.

"Maybe you will," said Sam. "There might be a bit of trouble, and I'm here on my own. There are some men who want to get at me, and I reckon that I can do with a pal."

His tired, pinched eyes suggested that he had been up all the previous night, and it occurred to me that Tinker and I were the cause of that alarm. It seemed rather humorous that now I should be invited to help Sam to guard against a surprise visit—by myself and Tinker.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Stay here. Cook the grub, and give me a hand if I get into trouble," said Sam. "If things turn out all right there's a hundred quid for you. How does that strike you?"

"That strikes me speechless," said I. "And I'm on. I'll stay here a week, if you like."

It was fixed up then that I should go across to one of the barns and hide there and watch the main road that passed the yard. Sam was dying for a sleep, and he told me not to waken him until the afternoon. I heard him climb up to the bedroom again, and I went out and made myself comfortable in the barn.

I thought it best to play up to the rogue for the time being, and I did so. Late in the afternoon I saw Tinker walk past with a man that I thought looked like one of the warders from the prison. The youngster stopped and eyed the farm for a moment, and I was afraid that he might make up his mind to come in, but he didn't, and went on towards Mellon's Mill with his companion.

As soon as he was past the farm I slipped across and wakened Sam.

"Someone had a look in here a minute ago," I said. "If you come to the window you can see them now."

He came to the window, and I pointed out the figures of Tinker and the warder. Sam stared hard at them for a few moments, and a muttered oath came from his lips.

"I think I recognise that youngster," he said. "I had a good look at him once already, and his figure and build fits. He's a dirty 'tec."

That was very nice of Sam, for Tinker's disguise was admirable. But I remembered that Tinker had had a meeting with Vanley and Sam in the Glades, and Sam had had good cause to remember the young 'un, while with regard to myself we had never actually met face to face before.

"A 'tec—eh?" I repeated. "And who is the other chap?"

"A warder from the prison on the moors," said Sam. "You can tell the cut of him a mile away."

He leaned against the window-sill, and his face was very black and frowning.

"I don't like the look of this," he said nervously. "I'll have to go and do a bit of nosing around."

I pretended to be alarmed.

"And you want me to wait here till you come back—because if you do, I ain't taking any, mister. That 'tec. might return and grab me!"

Sam grinned.

"You needn't wait; but you can come back this evening," he said. "I'll be here again in about two or three hours."

We left it at that, and I went off down towards Mellon's Mill. I was really trying to get in touch with Tinker, but although I hung on until about nine o'clock, there was no sign of him. I was afraid to leave any message, so I decided to leave it to chance, and I started back for the farm about half-past nine. It was after ten before I got there, and I found the padlock on the kitchen door hanging open, although Sam locked it when he left. But there was no light in the kitchen when I entered and I could not quite make out what had happened, then I heard a couple of things sound from upstairs, and I shinned up the steep flight, and struck a match as I went inside the bedroom.

Sam was lying on the cot, trussed up like a fowl ready for boiling!

He was looking at me with his eyes fairly bulging from his head, and he gave me a half sort of nod, beckoning to me to come and loosen him.

I had no idea who it was that had fastened

him up like that, or I might not have interfered. It did strike me that it might have been Tinker and the warden, but I dismissed that thought, for why should they have tied him up in the farm instead of carting him away at once to the police-station?

And, of course, the possibility of Blake having done it never entered my head.

So I released the stout rascal, and I never saw a man so thundering grateful. He was almost beside himself with fear at first, but he managed to calm down after a bit.

I asked him what had happened, and the story he told didn't help to clear the mystery at all.

"It's a gang of skunks that are out for that harvest," he said. "They know what is going to happen, and they tried to get me to spill; but I wasn't having any, and they left here, telling me that they'd set fire to the farm and let me burn!"

I suppose that that yarn seemed to him to be as good as any other, and I took it for what it was worth.

He came down into the kitchen, and went to the door.

"I've got another job on now," he said. "And this is one that you can help in—if you know anything about steering a boat?"

I could safely assure him on that point, and he suddenly whipped out two ten-pound notes, and put them in my hand.

"This is a bit extra," he said. "We are going to a place called Searach, and there's a ticklish job ahead of us—but that will pay you all right."

I couldn't see anything else to do but accept that offer, even although I did not know what Sam was driving at. His story about Sedgill had quickened my interest, and I meant, by hook or by crook, to hang on to him until something really definite took place. I felt sure, also, that Mr. Blake would turn up before Saturday came round, and meanwhile I was carrying out his suggestions about keeping touch.

The stout rascal and I walked right into Searach, landing there in the small hours of the morning. We found a cheap lodging-house that gave us a shelter, and Sam told me that we would have to be up very early in the morning. The walk had tired me rather, and it was eight o'clock when I wakened, to find Sam shaking my arm.

"Listen!" he said. "Do you know anything about running a petrol-launch?"

I had run several of these swift craft in my time, and I nodded my head. I saw that he was fairly trembling with excitement, and guessed that he had made some sort of discovery that had rather jarred his nerves.

"Well, come along," he went on. "I've got a launch, and we'll have to take a full supply of petrol, for we are going for a long run."

I dressed swiftly, and Sam brought me a huge packet of sandwiches that the lodging-house-keeper had cut for us. I munched at the sandwiches as we walked down the street. There was a fairly thick sea-mist on, as usual, and presently I found myself at a garage, where a man was loading tins of petrol on a barrow. Sam paid for the petrol,

and I got between the shafts and trundled the barrow down to the quay where Sam indicated a long, speedy-looking launch moored to some steps.

"There she is," he said. "And the sooner we get away the better."

I might as well state here that Sam had gone out earlier in the morning in order to find out how Blake and Blenkers had managed to collar him at the farm. He had discovered that the Swallow and the motor-launch had been brought round by the fishermen from Maulbers, and one of the men was found down on the beach, and gave Sam enough particulars to make the stout rascal have a shrewd suspicion of what had happened. He learned that Blenkers and Blake had come into Maulbers from the sea, and, knowing that Blenkers and Vanley had gone to Dobbins island, it was not difficult for the rogue to realise what had happened there.

The way that he had gained possession of the petrol-launch from the harbourmaster was also brought about easily enough. He found one of Blake's cards in possession of the fisherman that had brought the launch round—for the detective had given the harbourmaster at Maulbers a card, so that he might know who Blake was. Armed with that card Sam had found no difficulty in taking possession of the launch.

But all this was quite unknown to me that morning, and when we started off through the fog I little dreamed that at that very moment, on Thursday morning, Blake and Blenkers were back again at the Imperial Hotel, and that I, by releasing Sam, had practically made a hash of their plans!

We ran clear of the fog about noon, and I followed the course that Sam gave me, and about two o'clock in the afternoon Dobbins Island arose in front of us.

"That is the place," Sam said. "You are a daisy at steering, Joe; my word, you are! I could never have found the blinking place without you."

"We are going to that island, then?" I returned. "What might it be called?"

"It is called Dobbins Island," he said, and I had hard work to repress a gasp of surprise, for Tinker had told me about Blenkers's projected trip with Vanley, and it struck me that I was running a bigger risk than necessary now, for the point was that I did not know what side Blenkers was on. He had been backing up Vanley so strongly that, even although I liked the fellow, and could not understand his attitude, I could not quite make up my mind about him.

It is easy enough for people to be wise after the event, but I have to tell this just as it happened, and I admit that as we ran into the bay and came to a halt beside that old jetty I was feeling anything but comfortable. I was not afraid of Vanley recognising me, but it was another matter with Blenkers, for I had knocked about with him rather a lot, and I did not like the idea of facing those keen eyes of his.

But, of course, I need not have worried my head about that. Sam went off up the cliff road, and I sat still in the launch, making up my mind to give them a fight for it if it

came to the pinch. He was gone for about an hour, and when he came down the road again there was only one person with him, and that was Vanley.

The master-crook was in a towering rage, and I could hear his hard voice jabbering away as they came slowly towards me. But Sam must have drawn Vanley's attention to me, for he stopped his angry complaints, and they crossed the jetty together and climbed into the launch.

As Vanley came on board I gave him a quick touch of the cap, and Sam grinned.

"This is a friend of mine, Joe," he said. "He has had the bad luck to get left behind on this island, so we ain't wasted our time, you see. And now, Joe, it's about turn, and you can get back to Seareach as sharp as you like."

"Won't be able to fetch it to-night," I said in a muttering way.

Sam laughed. He was visibly relieved now that he had found the master-crook. The rest of the game was in Vanley's hand, and Sam was more than content to play second fiddle.

"Well, do your best, Joe," he said. "Just have a swig of this, and stick to it."

He held out a bottle of brandy-and-water, and I pretended to take a long pull.

"I've promised Joe a little bit of cash for what he's doing for us," Sam went on to Vanley, and the crook gave me an approving nod.

"That's all right," he said.

He had taken a seat in the bow of the boat, and presently Sam joined him, leaving me to do the steering and attending to the engine.

Their heads were very close together for the first part of the trip, and I could see that they were discussing something that did not altogether please them; but when the dusk came Vanley stretched himself out in the bow and went to sleep, while Sam came aft to my side.

"I'll give you a spell now if you like," he said.

I told him how to steer, and I had a rest, and needed it. When he wakened me again it was almost midnight. He would not let me put on any lights, and as it was again getting rather foggy I slowed down a little.

It was rather hard work, for I had no stars to guide me, and the little compass fixed on the stern was not a great deal of use. When dawn came I managed to sight the coast, and soon discovered that we had overshot our mark.

We were about ten miles above Seareach, and one of the engines was misfiring for lack of petrol.

I told Sam what was happening, and he went and roused Vanley, and they had a confab together. I always took care to be very busy tinkering with the engine when Vanley looked my way, and I was sure that he did not have the remotest idea of who it was that sat there in the greasy, foul overalls.

"Best you can do is to get as near to Seareach as possible, then bump her ashore," said Sam at last.

I obeyed these orders to the letter, and

beached the launch at Elvery's Cove somewhere about seven in the morning. The fog still held, and under cover of it we managed to leave the launch and slip past the coast-guard station unobserved. Sam and Vanley went on ahead, and I followed behind with the remains of the grub that had been stowed in the launch.

They reached the little cottage among the trees, then, while Vanley went inside, Sam turned to me.

"Look here, Joe," he said, "I reckon you deserve a rest, and I'll tell you what you can do. If you follow this road, and turn sharp to the left at the bottom, then go straight on for about a couple of miles, you get to Mellon's Mill. You can go right down to the farm then and make yourself comfortable. My friend and I will join you later on."

He looked rather sheepish for a moment. The reason did not dawn on me, but I know why now. He was afraid that Blake and Blenkers might come back to the farm and find me there, which would have been very awkward for Joe.

"Don't let anyone see you," he said at last. "I'd get into one of the barns if I was you. There's a lot of old sacks and old hay there, and they make a comfortable doo. I don't want that other gang to come back and nab you, you see."

In its way it was the best thing he could do for me, but, although I thanked him, I hadn't the remotest intention of leaving that cottage. I simply walked down the road, then doubled across the fields, and came back and hid in the trees where I could keep watch on the cottage.

Sam and Vanley did not stir out the whole of that morning, and it was late in the afternoon before Vanley emerged from the gates and turned up the road. A few minutes later Sam appeared, and that left me in a bit of a fix. I did not know which of them to follow, but I finally decided on Sam, because I realised that he held half of the secret that I was out to try and discover, that is to say, he was the man who would take Sedgill to the farm.

Sam did not go very far. He stopped at a row of cottages, and I saw him bargaining with a man. Then presently a horse and trap was led round from a small stable, and Sam drove it back to the cottage. I had to do a bit of a sprint across the fields to keep up with him, but I can move when I like, and I reached the woods behind the cottage before he had tied the horse to the gatepost.

As it grew darker I came out of the woods and crept into the garden so that I could see when Vanley returned. Vanley did return, and—well, Mr. Blake has already explained what happened in that garden.

When I had given Blake a short account of the above adventures, he admitted that, although I had apparently baffled him in one point, my work was likely to prove worth while after all.

"There is not much doubt about where Vanley and Sam are off to," Blake said.

"Discombe Farm, I should think," I returned.

"Exactly."

"But do you think they will risk staying there to-night?" I went on.

He studied that point for a moment.

"Vanley knows now that I was at Discombe Farm," he said at last. "Sam will have put him up to that. I thought that the skunk looked more frightened than usual when he first set eyes on me as I came up to the golf-club house. Perhaps there is a doubt about it. Lawless, for although Vanley may think he has laid Blenkers by the heels, he knows that I am still free."

"That is just the point," I returned. "Vanley knows that you are on his track, but does he know that you are aware Sedgill gets out to-morrow—I mean, does Vanley realise who Blenkers really is?"

Blake shook his head.

"I doubt it," he returned.

He looked at me for a moment.

"You see," he said, "if Vanley had been really sure about Blenkers—that is to say, if he was aware that it was Ralph Blenkers who faced him at the golf-course—he would not have been so eager to get the governor of the prison to arrest him. Vanley does not fear Ralph, but his brother, for it was his brother who planned the whole affair and tricked him so cleverly. It is the elder Blenkers whom Vanley has every cause to be afraid of, and at this moment the elder Blenkers is behind prison walls, and cannot do Vanley any harm."

I could follow that reasoning easily enough.

"Then, Vanley knowing, or thinking, that the elder Blenkers has been arrested on a charge that will easily be disproved by to-morrow morning, will have to make some sort of move to-night," I said.

Blake nodded.

"That is what I am driving at," he returned. "Vanley thinks that he has managed to trick the governor of the prison into locking up Blenkers, and that disposes of Blenkers for this evening. But Vanley must also know that as soon as the governor gets back to gaol he will find his mistake, will find that he has not lost his prisoner, therefore Blenkers will be released in the morning."

He smiled grimly.

"Everything hinges on when Sedgill gets released," he ended. "The usual hour is between nine and ten, I believe, after the work-parties have set off. The authorities arrange that so that the convicts may not see their luckier companions going away."

"I suppose that is thoughtful of them," I said.

Blake turned to me.

"But the Home Office has the power to order the release of a prisoner at any earlier hour if they care to move in the matter," he went on. "It might be worth getting into touch with Sir Melville Drake, the Home Secretary, and getting him to release Sedgill two hours earlier than usual!"

I saw the idea behind his words at once.

"Meaning that you want to collar Sedgill before these other beggars get a chance to reach him," I returned. "That is a thundering good scheme, but how are you going to manage it, and what are we going to do

with Vanley and that stout rascal in the meantime?"

"One thing at a time," laughed Blake. "I want to find a telephone where I can put a trunk-call through. Fortunately I know Sir Melville's private number in London, and he is a personal friend of mine. When I have fixed up with him we'll think about Vanley and the other rascal."

I stood up and nodded my head.

"Good!" I said. "For the telephone I reckon we'd better follow the direction Sam gave to me early this morning, and get to Melton's Mill. There is bound to be a 'phone there."

Ten minutes later we were hurrying off down the road, and shortly after eight o'clock we entered Melton's Mill. It was only a little cluster of houses, and owes its importance to the fact that it serves as a junction for the two railways that run through that part of the country. We found the post-office, and Blake duly put through his trunk-call. It took him some time to fix up his arrangements, but when he came out there was a quiet smile on his face.

"Managed it?" I asked.

Blake nodded.

"Sir Melville is 'phoning direct to the prison, to the governor, and is making arrangements that Sedgill will be released at any hour after midnight to-night that I select."

I chuckled over that statement.

"I don't think that the governor will be very pleased when he gets that message," I put in. "He is a bit of a bully, and you must have rubbed him up the wrong way to-day."

"The point is that, legally, Sedgill's sentence ends at twelve midnight tonight," Blake pointed out. "And so Sir Melville is quite within his rights to make any arrangements he chooses."

He looked at me and smiled.

"So you see, Lawless," he said, "we can go along to the prison and fix up Sedgill's exit at any time we like after the clock strikes twelve."

"That certainly sounds promising, and it gives us a few hours to spare now," I said.

"Quite so. And we are not going to waste them," Blake returned. "I think it might be worth strolling out as far as Discombe, just to make sure that Vanley and Sam have not taken up quarters there."

It was really what I had been itching to do, for that old, ruined farmstead had rather cast a spell on me. To think that it had stood there a weed-grown, unkempt spot, while all around it were fields of wheat and barley and smiling pastures, for long years, a derelict, hopeless wilderness; yet somewhere in its grass-grown, tangled acres lay a treasure that was worth more than all the farm round it.

"Discombe fascinates me," I said to Blake. "I feel that I want to get there, and stay there until Sedgill comes along and supplies the last link to the mystery, and I want to be there when he does."

Blake smiled.

"We will both be there, or I shall be very much mistaken," he returned grimly.

I had noticed when we entered the little village that there seemed an unusual number of people in the narrow street. Now, when we emerged again, the numbers seemed to have increased. At every cottage there were a group of women and children, and I saw that the men were all moving down towards the outskirts of the village.

"Something has happened," I said to Blake. "As a rule this village seems to go to sleep about sunset."

We went on down the street, and presently a remark made by a man passing us brought Blake to a halt.

"Excuse me," he said, "did I hear you mention something about an escape from the prison?"

The man turned.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "The gun went off about an hour ago. You can see the searchlight from down below; they be sweeping all over the moors."

I think that Blake turned at the same time as I did, and we looked at each other for a moment.

I wondered if Blake thought the same thing as I did, for my mind turned at once to the one convict in there who was really mad enough to attempt to break away from a well-guarded convict prison, for he had already proved himself mad enough to break in!

"I wonder if it is Blenkins," said Blake, and I had to laugh at the way he seemed to answer my very thoughts.

We quickened our pace then, and in a few moments were standing in a knot of silent men watching the great flashes of light stabbing through the darkness far ahead. They swept round, now vanishing, then appearing again, and I managed to count them. There were four great searchlights, one at each angle of the high walls of the prison, and they were searching up and down, to and fro, like great hungry eyes.

"Come along," Blake whispered in a quiet tone. "We might as well get out a little and see what happens."

We passed through the throng, and someone called to us.

"It ain't safe to go along the road now, misters," he cried. "The warders will be out with them guns of theirs, and they beant too particular who they aims at, if you don't stop sharp at the word."

It was friendly advice, but it would have taken more than the chance of a stray shot from a warder to stop Blake or myself. We felt that out there in the darkness there was being played another grim scene in the scheme that we had been working on, and it was our duty to go out and try to get in touch.

"That is all right," Blake returned. "If they shoot us we won't be missed much!"

That dry remark brought a laugh from the stolid villagers, and in a few moments we had left the lighted place, and were striding down a dark road that wound to the right, in the direction of Discombe Farm. We had covered about a mile when we received the first challenge.

A hoarse voice barked at us from the long

grass beside the road, and we came to a halt at once. A figure with a lantern came forward, and behind it walked another figure carrying a loaded rifle between his hands. The warder with the lantern lifted it so that the beams fell on Blake and I.

"Where are you two going to?" the man asked.

"Search," Blake returned quietly.

The two warders hesitated for a moment.

"Don't you know what is happening?" the man with the lantern went on. "Can't you see the searchlight at work?"

"Of course I can," Blake returned drily. "But what has that got to do with our going to Search, in any case?"

"Oh, nothing," came the reply, "but they mean that one of the birds have flown from over there, and most people give the moors a wide berth when there is a man-hunt on."

Blake smiled.

"I don't blame them," he said. "But it just happens that I am, perhaps, by way of being a man-hunter myself, when the occasion demands it."

He drew aside the lapel of his coat, and revealed an official badge—a badge that made the two warders stiffen to attention and salute.

"Of course, that makes a lot of difference, sir," the first warder went on. "No need to warn you what to do in a case like this."

Blake nodded to the prison.

"I should think that he was a very clever man who got out of that," he observed.

"None of us know how he managed it, sir," the second warder put in. "In fact, there's a bit of mystery attached—"

He suddenly cut himself short, for along the road there came another figure bearing a lantern. The two warders backed away from us quietly.

"Be careful how you go, gentlemen," the first warder said. "It is very dangerous on the road to-night."

I knew what that change of tone meant. The newcomer was evidently someone in authority, and as he came forward I saw the uniform of a chief warder under the light of the lamp. He held his light up so that it fell on us, but as Blake turned to meet the glare there was a short pause, then the chief-warder stretched out his hand.

"If it isn't Mr. Blake my eyes are not worth having," he said.

Blake tried to make out the features under the lamp, and the man smiled.

"I don't suppose you remember me, sir," he said. "My name is Stone. I was once a sergeant on Baker Street."

Blake has a wonderful memory, and he recalled the man at once.

"Of course, I remember you," he said, grasping the hand. "But I thought that you went to the States, Stone?"

"So I did, sir, but I came back again," the chief warder put in. "I found that old England was the best place, after all."

Then he turned and we began to walk up the road together. At every hundred yards or so there were two warders posted. The whole prison staff must have been turned out for that hunt, and it struck me that the unfortunate warders were probably justified

in feeling angry with the man who had made them turn out like that.

"What has happened, Stone?" Blake asked.

It seemed to me that Stone hesitated for a moment, and his voice was rather dry as he replied.

"A prisoner got away from the prison about an hour and a half ago," he said. "It was a clever escape, and we have not found him yet."

We were in a quieter part of the road now, and the chief warden slackened his pace.

"A very clever escape. Mr. Blake," he said. "So clever that I feel sure that you would think the man an extra cute individual—if you knew him."

Again his tone seemed to be rather strange. I wondered what he was driving at, but I was wise enough not to make any remark. I did not doubt but what Blake was also aware of that dry note in the chief warden's voice.

"I'll take your word for it with pleasure, Stone," said Blake. "And, by the way, what was the name of the man?"

"His name, Mr. Blake? Well, he called himself Dalverry!"

That was the name that Ralph Blenkins had passed under in prison, and all our doubts vanished then. It was really our friend Blenkins for whom these armed men were now searching, in quest of whom these great lights flickered and stabbed through the hushed night.

I was not at all sure of that chief warden, and I nudged Blake, but the detective was up to the right line to take.

"But that is rather extraordinary, Stone," he said. "For this afternoon at Seareach Golf Club the governor of your prison arrested a man whom he gave that very name to, unless I am very much mistaken."

That was a clever move on Blake's part, as the next sentence revealed.

"Yes, Mr. Blake, that is quite true. I had a telephone-message from Seareach about it—and, in fact, that is how this rotten affair really happened."

He swung the light forward again.

"I didn't know but what—I thought that you might have something to do——" He stopped and looked at Blake. "Well, sir, I know the sort of man you are, and when your name was mentioned as having helped to identify the man that our governor arrested, I had a notion that there was more in it than met the eye, as it were. You don't usually make mistakes, from what I know of you—and that seemed such a darned silly mistake to make."

"Then the governor was mistaken?"

The chief warden chuckled.

"Of course, he was," he said. "When I got that message I made it my duty to send for Dalverry. He was brought from his cell to my office, and after that I had nothing to do but report to the police that there was some mistake somewhere. Unfortunately the governor hadn't got back to the prison when the message came. I don't know whether he's arrived yet."

"Well, your governor made a mistake, ob-

viously," said Blake. "For a convict couldn't be in two places at once."

The chief warden smiled.

"Not very well, sir," he returned. "Dalverry wanted to know what was the matter, so I told him that he'd been arrested at the Seareach golf course as an escaped convict, and that one of the principal witnesses against him was a very famous detective named Blake."

I heard Blake give vent to a low whistle—too low to catch the ears of the chief warden.

"The devil, you did!" Blake muttered in my ear.

"I thought it would strike him as being rather funny, and it sort of made up for me dragging him all the way from his cell, too. But he didn't seem at all pleased, confound him! And he's given us a heap of trouble."

"How did he get away?"

"The softest thing in the world," said Stone. "The warden who brought him down to my room thought that I would take Dalverry back myself when I had done with him. That is what usually happens, but only in the case of a prisoner who has been misconducting himself, and has to be told off a bit, before getting anything in the way of extra punishment. With Dalverry, of course, there was no idea of punishment, and I dismissed him, thinking that the warden had waited outside. But there was no one in the passage, and Dalverry must just have walked straight out into the yard, across to the hospital, and out through the side-gate there. The point is that all convicts are visited at seven o'clock, and that visit was just going on then, so of course no one thought that a stray convict would be knocking about in the yard by himself."

I grinned into the darkness. That cool escape was so very typical of the nerveless man who had carried it out. Blenkins had just walked out of prison with the same easy manner that he had walked into it.

"It certainly seems an—easy way of breaking gaol," said Blake, with a half-suppressed chuckle.

"It is no laughing matter for me," said Stone uneasily. "We didn't discover that the beggar had got away until half an hour later, when his own warden came down to see if I had finished with him. I tell you, the fat was in the fire then, and he had a good half-hour's start."

We had reached a cross-roads, and Stone came to a halt.

"Of course, we are bound to catch the chap," he added hopefully. "No one ever gets away from here. But, what with the governor arresting a wrong man, and then this happening—well, I don't know what sort of a report the newspapers will make of it."

Blake held out his hand to the chief warden.

"I don't see that you are to blame, Stone," he said. "And, in any case, the fault was, first of all, your chief's. If he hadn't mistaken his man in the first place, it would never have happened."

"That's what I think, sir," said Stone.

We watched his sturdy figure swing off up the road, then began to move on down the road to the right. We were now inside

the picquet-line of warders, for they were posted all along the main road, and this one that ran to Discombe was only a side one, moving parallel to the main.

"Of course you know why Blenkers did this mad thing?" Blake said presently.

"I can guess," I returned. "He fears that his brother has been recognised, or—or—"

"Or that I in some way have given him away," Blake ended. "Yes, that is about it, and if he were to meet Ralph now I'm sure that Ralph would assure him that he was correct. I had a rotten part to play at the golf-links, but I think the result will justify it, although I never anticipated this fresh development."

We were moving very slowly, and the road ran between two high mounds, so that for the moment we could not see the lights of the prison nor yet the fitful gleams of the lanterns in the hands of the warders watching the road.

That line of bobbing lanterns were strung out now in a great circle, each light about a hundred yards from the other, and I realised that it was impossible for anyone to break through that cordon. If Blenkers had not been able to get away across the main road before the warders discovered his absence he did not have a chance of doing so now. It simply meant that he was somewhere inside the wide girdle around the prison—somewhere in a circle that was roughly about six miles wide—and included the dark, old farmstead of Discombe in its circumference.

"I wonder what has happened to Vanley and Sam," Blake said suddenly. "If they have walked into this little show they probably will have developed a bad attack of cold feet, and it looks very doubtful whether Sedgill will risk digging up his swag to-morrow. He certainly will not venture here so long as the warders are knocking about searching for Blenkers."

It was another side of the issue that was not without its interest.

In fact, it seemed to me that every hour brought a change in the extraordinary case, and we never knew from moment to moment just how to fix any plan.

"What will the warders do?" I asked.

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"Remain on duty all night; then, when the morning comes, they will make a clean sweep across the moors, searching every cottage and wood and nook and cranny," he returned.

"Then if Blenkers hasn't got through, it is all up with him," I put in.

Blake turned to me.

"I don't think he has got through," he muttered. "I don't think that it ever occurred to him to get through. You know what he said about Discombe Farm and what was going to happen to-morrow. I'm open to bet that to-morrow Blenkers will be there—if he isn't there now."

He was silent for a moment.

"You see, he is bound to believe that Ralph is bowled over, and that means that Sedgill will be able to get away without anyone recognising him. It must have been that thought which first put the mad idea of

escape into his head. Rather than lose the chance he had waited for so long, Blenkers made a dash for liberty, and is no doubt at this moment hiding—what the deuce was that?"

Blake changed his position swiftly, for from the darkness on his left a faint croaking sound came, the low croak that a frog might make; but there were no frogs on that moor at that time of the year.

"We are not very far away from the brook that runs past the farm," I said. "And the sound came from that direction."

Blake and I turned and slipped past the slope into the tall grass. We covered about twenty yards, then suddenly Blake's hand fell on my wrist, and, with one pull, I was down flat on my face by his side.

"Someone is just coming up out of the brook," he breathed. "Listen!"

I strained my ears for a few moments, then I caught the faint rustic of slow-moving feet through the grass, and later the half-stified breathing of someone who had been undergoing great exertion.

When one lies face downwards on the ground sound comes to them much better than in any other position, and it was a long time before I suddenly saw a grotesque shape loom between me and the dark stars. It was our position that allowed Blake and I to get a full view of the crouching figure as it came noiselessly forward. Had we been on our feet, the background of rising earth would have hidden it from view, for it was descending the slope.

I stared at the shape, hardly able to believe my own eyes. There was a big tuft of something light and feathery standing out against the sky, and beneath it were two legs!

It looked as though a clump of reeds had suddenly decided to have a stroll, and had grown very human limbs for the process!

However, I did not have very long to wait for an explanation of the mystery. The grotesque thing came waddling onward, and as it passed close to Blake, the detective suddenly arose and gripped at the moving legs, bringing the thing down with a thud. I made a pounce to help, and we had a few minutes' tussle, rolling down the slope in a rare mix-up; then I managed to anchor myself over the legs, and Blake made himself responsible for the other part of the struggling clump.

"What the blazes is it, Blake?" I gasped.

The two legs that I had been holding were kicking like mad, but as soon as I spoke they stopped.

"Get off my chest, guv'nor!" a strangled voice said.

It was young Tinker!

Of course, we let up on him then, and presently his head and shoulders came out of the clump of reeds. I saw then what had happened. He had tied a circle of reeds all round his chest, and had evidently been wading through the brook, for his lower limbs were soaking wet.

"What is the scheme, young 'un?" Blake asked.

Tinker had managed to cut himself outside

his camouflage stuff by then, and he sat up and grinned at us through the darkness.

"I've been walking past about six hundred warders—or less," he said, with a grim chuckle. "They are strung out all along the brook, and I had to pretend to be a clump of reeds!"

I laughed.

"Or a clump in reeds!" said I. "Why go to all that trouble?"

He turned to me.

"Because I'm carrying a snit of clothes to Blenkins—he is hiding in Discombe Farm," came the grim reply.

He dropped a little bundle of clothes at my feet.

"I fished them out of a valise hidden in a little coppice," he said. "Blenkins said that you, guv'nor, would know where they were."

Blake nodded his head.

"Yes, I knew where the valise was," he returned.

"There was another snit, with the real broad-arrow brand," Tinker went on. "But as Blenkins is already wearing that kind, I didn't trouble to bring it!"

He seemed to be very amused over his experience, and we got him to tell us the story.

"I've been making friends with the warden who looks after the prisoners when they are released," the youngster explained. "I had no idea what had become of you, Lawless, and it seemed to me that I would have to carry out the arrangements single-handed!"

"Sorry, Tinker," I put in. "But I didn't have a chance to get at you. I only set eyes on you once, and that was when you stopped and looked at the farm along with another man."

"That was the very chap I am talking about," he went on. "I had to let him know a bit about myself. I showed him my Scotland Yard badge, and I pretended I was down here to keep an eye on Sedgill, for fear that he might get into touch with some of his crook pals again. I have fixed up with the warden, and he has agreed to let me stay in the gatekeeper's office to-night, so that when Sedgill is released I will come out with him. For all that Sedgill knows, I will be another lag being let out at the same time, and I had a notion of pulling up with him."

"Not a bad scheme," Blake put in. "We might make use of that. But go on with your yarn, young 'un."

We were still in the hollow of the sunken roadway, and although we could see the searchlights flashing over our heads now and again, we knew that we were safe enough down there.

"This evening I thought I'd have another stroll down to Discombe," Tinker went on. "I would have had a good look at the place before, only the warden was with me, and I didn't want him to know too much. I got to the farm about six o'clock, and I could see that someone had been living in the place; but you know all about that!"

"Yes, we know all about that," I returned.

"It was getting dark before I had finished my search," Tinker went on. "I was just going to clear out of the place, and was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, when

I heard a splashing from the duckpond, and saw someone crawling out of it and making a bee-line for me. I had my electric-torch, and I turned it on the figure as it came sprinting across. I can tell you that it gave me a bit of a shock when I saw the convict garb, but a minute later I recognised Blenkins. It was rather a good job for me that I did, I think, for he was carrying a broken fence-post, and he looked as if he meant business!" He grinned through the darkness at me. "I'd have had a thick ear in about half a second, but I gave him a shout, and he dropped the cudgel."

"What's the idea, Blenkins?" I asked.

"He dragged me into the kitchen before he would explain. I suppose you know as much about it as I do. Anyhow, there he was, large as life, and had walked out of prison by a side-door, just because no one had thought of looking after him for a moment. I tell you, he's about the coolest chap I have ever struck."

I think we could all agree with that opinion. I know that I had already fixed Blenkins from the "nerve" point of view.

Tinker turned to his governor.

"Blenkins is in a bit of a fix, guv'nor," he said. "He couldn't quite understand what had happened at Searcach. He had heard that you had his brother arrested, and although he did not doubt your word, he was anxious."

Blake chuckled.

"I can't blame him for that," the detective admitted. "There were certainly awkward developments that I had to handle, and there was no way of getting a message to Blenkins. Indeed, under the circumstances, perhaps we will find that his method of handling the affair may work out best, after all."

Tinker stooped and lifted the bundle.

"Anyhow, after a while Blenkins asked me to go and get his civilian clothes out of the valise in the coppice," he ended. "I only just started when the warders made their first move across the moors, and that blessed searchlight began to wink and stare all round me. Blenkins is hiding in the loft beyond the farm, and I said that I would bring back his clothes as soon as it was safe. But I've been hung up for over an hour—dared not move until it was dark, you know."

He nodded in the direction of the brook.

"There are two warders on guard on the roadside just beyond the coppice," he added. "I had to work my way down to the brook, then arrange that clump of reeds round me, for on every bridge there is a warden, and they all have guns."

"And you came right down the brook—as a lump of loose reeds?" I said.

He laughed.

"It was the only way I could work it," he returned. "And I can tell you that I was in a blue funk half of the time. Once I got to a footbridge, and a couple of warders were leaning over the rail. One of them actually dropped a stone on me as the reeds floated under the bridge. That stone landed

plump on my nose, and I did not even dare to dodge!"

He told the affair in his usual light-hearted way, but there was no wanting a grim side to it. These warders were armed, and were quite entitled to use their weapons. Had they suspected for a moment that there was a living being concealed under that tangle of dark reeds floating down the brook, they might easily have tested their suspicion by sending a shot into it!

"You took a big chance, young 'un," Blake said quietly. "But, as usual, you managed to come through safely. And now I think we'd better get up to Discombe Farm, if we can manage it."

We started off again, and presently found ourselves close to the broken-down gates of the farm. And here another surprise awaited us, for tethered to the post on the left was a horse-and-trap—a horse-and-trap that it did not take me long to recognise.

"Vanley and Sam are here," I muttered.

We were close to the fence, and Blake recognised the vehicle standing there. He turned to me.

"I think that it would be better for me to go and have a look round the farm," he said slowly. "You and Tinker can cut across to the barn and try to pick up Blenkins. Tell him to get dressed in that suit at once."

"What is the scheme, gov'nor?" Tinker asked.

"There is none," the detective replied quietly. "In a case like this we have to extemporise; we'll have to make our plans as the moment demands. No hard and fast schemes are of any use, with a cordon of prison-warders round us, young 'un. All we can do is to try and watch the way the cat jumps, and get out of its way!"

He moved along the fence, then halted for a moment.

"Wait in the barn until I come," he said. "There is not much danger of any warders coming along now. They mean to keep their cordon all night, and start their real search in the morning. They know that Blenkins cannot slip through their line to-night, and daylight will help them to make a thorough search."

A moment later and he had vanished, then Tinker and I worked our way down beside the fence until we came to the cowsheds at the back. We had to cross them to reach the big barns, and we did so without meeting anyone. Tinker went into the barn, and I followed him. The youngster headed straight for a crazy ladder that led up to the loft, and when he climbed it we heard a rustling above.

Tinker gave a croak—the same sound as I had heard from the brook—and the croak was answered.

"That you, Tinker?"

The cool, nasal drawl from Blenkins made no smile, and we shinned up that ladder in quick time.

"We are all here, Mr. Blenkins," Tinker said, with a chuckle. "It looks as though it is going to be the last round, and we've gathered to watch it."

"Who are 'we'?" said Blenkins.

Tinker lighted his pocket-torch and allowed

it to fall on my grimed face for a moment. Blenkins stared for a moment before he recognised me, then he shot out his long hand.

"I didn't know you, I guess," he said. "But there are none of us looking our best just at the moment, are we?"

The light was full on him then, and he certainly presented a grim figure. The convict-clothes were torn and muddy, and his face and hands were very grubby. He had run and crawled and waded in that rush for freedom, and gorse-bushes and muddy ditches are no respecters of persons.

"The gov'nor said that you had to get changed in quick time," said Tinker. "I think he has some scheme up his sleeve."

Blenkins began to change at once, and while he did so I gave him a brief outline of what had happened, as far as Blake and I were concerned. Blenkins was particularly interested in what had happened at the golf-club, and he realised that Blake had been cornered, and had taken the best way out.

"He was afraid that Vanley might get cold feet, I guess," Blenkins agreed. "But when Vanley saw Ralph locked up, he knew that that would give him a chance to get at Sedgill before the mistake was discovered. Yes, I can see it now, although I admit that I was in a bit of a haze when I was sent for by the chief warden, Stone. Mind, you, Tinker, Stone is quite a decent bird, and told me that he knew Mr. Blake very well. He rather tried to pump me, for I think he suspected something; but I wasn't out to make any more confidants then."

He had made a complete change by now, for Tinker had brought the whole spare outfit, even to light tan shoes, black socks, shirt, collar, and tie.

"We'll have to stow this other kit somewhere," Tinker said, gathering up the convict garb, "and it will have to be somewhere safe."

We found a narrow shaft that had once been used for feeding the mangers below. We jammed the broad-arrow suit, boots, and stockings and shirt into a tight huddle, and wedged them in the slant. So far as I know, that kit is still there!

"You say that Vanley and Sam are here," Blenkins said presently. "It is rather strange, because I've been watching the farm, but I've seen no sign of anyone."

He took us across the loft and indicated a narrow gap in the wall, through which the farm itself was plainly visible.

"I've been watching it, and there hasn't been a light there, to my knowledge," he said.

The words had hardly left his lips when there came from the farm the splintering crash of wood, as though some heavy body had fallen against a door, forcing it from its hinges.

"That sounds very much like business," I put in.

It was too dark to distinguish anything, but we could hear a scuffling sound, and the quick, panting breathing of struggling men.

"I'm going down there," Tinker said swiftly. "I've got an idea that the gov'nor has walked into some sort of trap, and it

strikes me that the odds are a bit too heavy for him."

"Good idea, Tinker," Blenkins returned. "But we will all go down, and might as well do so together."

We hurried across the loft and scrambled down that shaky old ladder, then nipped out into the farmyard. Blenkins and Tinker were ahead, and I saw them sprint across the yard, and followed.

As I drew near to the door of the farm I made out a heap of struggling figures, and suddenly a voice that we all recognized sounded:

"This way, men!"

It was the governor of the prison!

I admit that for a moment I hesitated, as that gentleman was just about the last individual that I wanted to meet at that moment, not so much for what he might do to me, as for Blenkins. But the lanky American had no qualms, and with a rush he threw himself into the fight. But it was Tinker who really did the brainy trick. He switched on his electric-torch for a moment, so that we might see who was who.

That white beam of light picked out face after face, and I can tell you that it gave me something of a shock.

The governor of the prison was gripping at the legs of a man who was flat on his back, while holding on to each arm of the same individual were Vanley and his rascally confederate, Sam!

For a moment we could not distinguish the face of their captive; then another movement brought it into view for a moment—it was Serton Blake!

"All right, young 'un," I gasped. "Out with that light—quick!"

Tinker tumbled to my meaning at once, and the light vanished. Then he and I tackled Vanley and Sam, while Blenkins, with a chuckle of satisfaction, went for his old enemy again, the red-necked, bullying man whom he had thrashed on the golf-links—the governor of the gaol.

It was a rather interesting dust-up. I selected Sam as my special victim, because he was rather the better of the two. I managed to put a lock on him, and he rolled away from Blake. Our attack was rather a surprise to the three, for, of course, they had thought that we were warders, and therefore friends of the governor.

Sam made a punch at me as we rolled away together, and his fist landed on my jaw pretty heavily. But I did not let him repeat that blow. He was as strong as a

bull, and there was no time to waste. I managed to get on top of him, and after another wild struggle found his jaw with a swinging right that settled the affair so far as he was concerned. He flattened out with a grunt, and his stout body went limp. I broke away from him then, and scrambled to my feet just in time to see Tinker being thrown by Vanley. But before I could reach the crook Blake butted into the skirmish, and Vanley went down under as clean a punch as ever knocked out a double-dyed rascal.

The crook went sprawling on his back with a howl of pain, and next moment Blenkins and the governor of the gaol had tripped over him, and were rolling on the cobbled yard together.

No one had spoken a word so far, and it was only when the governor saw how the fight was going against him that he gave tongue. But his half-cry was smothered by Blenkins, and we thought that we had managed to fix the affair up nice and neatly, when suddenly there came a shout from the road, and a lantern flashed across the yard.

In another moment a dozen warders were streaking across towards us, headed by Chief-Warder Stone.

"Quick, Blenkins!" I breathed.

The tall chap leaped to his feet, and in a bunch the four of us went for the fine of uniformed men.

Tinker performed a very clever trick then, for he ran towards Stone, and with a quick, deft kick sent that lantern spinning up into the air.

It went flying across the yard and fell plump into the duck-pond; and the friendly darkness came down again, giving us the chance we wanted.

We butted into that hnc, and fists were flying for a moment, but they had not expected that combined rush, and we waded through them easily enough and barged for the open gateway.

Of course the whole pack gave tongue then, and a mad better-shelter rush took place; but we had the advantage of them, for we knew the lie of the ground, and we headed for the hollow in the road. Blake and Blenkins were leading, and Tinker and I joggled along behind them. The young 'un was chucking to himself over that quick kick of his, and certainly it was that that had really saved the situation, for it had prevented any of the officials from recognising us.

I had no idea where Blake was leading

me to, but he kept up a steady sprint for a good quarter of an hour, then came to a halt at last on the edge of a smooth, broad roadway. We all listened for a moment, but there was no sign or sound of the pursuit, and presently Blenkers chuckled.

"Say, that was some fight," he drawled. "But how did you manage to walk into the hunch, Blake?"

The detective explained. He had gone across to the farm, and had walked round it, searching for traces of occupants, but there was neither light nor sound, and at last he ventured to step into the kitchen.

"They must have been waiting for me inside," he explained. "Their first rush saw me very nearly flattened out, but they could not quite hold me, and I managed to get into the yard before they had me down."

He turned to Blenkers.

"They were waiting for you, Blenkers," he said grimly.

It was Blenkers's turn to repeat his story, and Blake listened quietly. Then he turned and pointed ahead.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked.

We all stared into the darkness for a moment, then suddenly a white light came streaking round, and very nearly found us. We were within a couple of hundred yards of the goal, and the searchlight had passed behind us, lighting up the dark road that we stood on.

"Humph! It looks as though we've got out of the frying-pan, and are very nearly into the fire," said Tinker.

Blake chuckled.

"And it is into the fire that we are going," he returned. "There is no chance of us breaking through the cordon, and I don't know that it would be wise to leave this part of the country to-night."

He turned to Tinker.

"We will have to divide forces," he said. "I want you and Lawless to keep together, and Blenkers and I will tackle the prison. I am going to get the governor to release Sedgill as soon as it is dawn, and you two will have to collar Sedgill when he comes out. Tell him that you are waiting for him, that Sam and Vanley have sent you to bring him across to Discombe, and you must take him there and wait till we come."

"But what are you going to do, gov'nor?" Tinker asked.

Blake nodded to Blenkers, and smiled.

"I'm going to have a game with the governor of the jail," he returned slowly. "And Blenkers is going to help me."

We discussed the plans for a few moments, then Tinker and I slipped off and found a thick clump of gorse that promised a fairly safe hiding-place for the night. It was hollow in the centre, and we could see the road from it, and could also watch the swing of the searchlight from the angle of the prison wall ahead.

"It looks as though the gov'nor was going into the lion's den," my young companion muttered. "But I'm not worrying about him. Only I'd give something to be there and witness that interview with the governor when he gets back."

I could have echoed that desire, for I was just as keen to see how Blake was going to handle what was a distinctly difficult position as Tinker was.

But how the great detective did work the trick deserves another chapter. Of course I did not know about it till afterwards, but I might as well record it here in its proper place, where it fits in with the rest of the yarn.

And this is how it happened.

CHAPTER 2.

The Governor is Mystified, then Convinced—Two Rogues Receive a Night's Lodging, and an Innocent Man is Cleared—The End.

SHORTLY after ten o'clock at night the governor of the prison was in his quarters, behind the main building, when one of the warders left on duty came to him with a couple of visiting-cards. The governor glanced at the cards—stared at them would be the better description—then looked up at the warder.

"Where are these gentlemen?" he asked.

"They have been here for some time, sir," the warder announced. "They have been waiting in the visitors' room. Mr. Folkes saw them first, then told them to wait until you returned."

The governor had slipped into his residence by the private entrance; the bustle that he had had in the farmhouse had left him in a rather dishevelled state, and he had not been anxious to allow his staff to see him in that plight.

A few words will explain here how it came about that Vanley and his confederate had been joined by the governor. The two rogues had met the governor on the road and had offered him a lift. The governor had recog-

nised Vanley as being the man who had helped him to fix the charge against Ralph Blenkers, and had accepted the invitation.

It was only when they reached the farm that the trio saw the signs from the prison that indicated the escape of a convict, and the governor had managed to get in touch with one of the searching warders, who had given him full details of the event.

The peculiar circumstances surrounding the case made that information rather disturbing. It will be remembered that the governor had already brought about the imprisonment of one man whom he had sworn was an escaped convict, yet here was this very convict setting the whole prison to work to search for him now!

The governor realised that he had made a mistake, but it was too late to get in touch with Seareach, where he knew the man arrested on the links was confined.

Vanley and Sam were waiting for him when he returned with this information, and the crook instantly suggested a scheme. Vanley had every reason to fear that Blenkers was aware of what was going to happen at Discombe Farm, and so he suggested to the governor that they should wait there and collar anyone who came to the place. Vanley hinted that the convict would probably make for that lonely spot, and the governor fell in with the suggestion.

The reader is already aware of what happened when Blake entered the cottage. The governor and his two associates found themselves in a circle of warders, and they heard how the four companions had slipped clean away. Vanley and Sam were anxious now to get out of the mess, and the governor had left them on the road with their conveyance, while he hurried back to the prison.

All this had taken some time, and now, as he looked at the warden, the governor suddenly realised that so far he had not played a very brilliant part in the affair. When a convict escapes from a gaol inquiries are usually made and reasons demanded.

It dawned on the thick-shouldered governor that, taking all the circumstances into consideration, things might turn out not at all pleasant for him.

"Tell Mr. Folkes that I want to see him at once," he said.

A few moments later Folkes, a keen-eyed, capable man, made his appearance. Folkes had himself applied for the position of governor of that prison, and was much more qualified for the task than its present holder. But there had been back-stair influences at

work and Folkes had failed. He was, therefore, not at all sorry to get a chance of this sort, and he took full advantage of it.

"I should be glad if you will explain all this trouble, Mr. Folkes," the governor began. "It seems very strange that this convict should escape during my absence. There must have been gross carelessness displayed by someone, and I am afraid that I will have to hold you responsible."

The assistant-governor's eyes flashed. He was by no means the sort of man who would shoulder another's blame.

"I am sorry to hear that, sir," he said civilly enough, although there was a grim twitch of the lips as he spoke. "I may, of course, be held responsible for the escape, but the incidents that led up to it were not of my making, but of yours!"

"What the deuce do you mean? What have I got to do with it?"

Folkes shrugged his shoulders.

"We received a 'phone message from Seareach stating that you had handed into custody one of our 'lifers,' sir," he said. "That message was received by Chief Warden Stone, and naturally he sent to the prison to verify the arrest. The man who was supposed to be arrested was brought down to Stone's office and interviewed by him. It is obvious, therefore, that as he was here when the 'phone message came through that you had made a mistake, and a rather serious mistake."

He went on to repeat Stone's story of what had happened, and the governor listened in gloomy silence.

"I could have sworn that the man whom I had arrested was our man," he said at last.

Folkes shrugged his shoulders.

"A man cannot be in two places at the same time, sir," he said.

The governor leaned forward.

"But the fellow has escaped now," he put in slowly. "I am thinking of the report that I will have to furnish, and it occurred to me we might be able to make some sort of statement that would cover both incidents."

He was distinctly in a hole, and was trying to find a way out of it.

"For instance, if we were to state that the escape took place here early this afternoon, before I had that other man arrested, that would justify my actions in his case."

It was certainly one way of getting out of an awkward fix, although not a very creditable one. Folkes's eyes went very cold.

"There might be very big difficulties in—"

er-arranging that story, sir," he said drily. "More particularly as there are now two gentlemen waiting to see you who will probably have a very large say in the matter."

The governor scowled at the door for a moment.

"What do they want with me?" he demanded.

"Mr. Blake has received authority from the Home Office to take charge of the man Sedgill, whose release takes place to-morrow," said Folkes.

"Authority from the Home Office! I know nothing about that!"

"Quite so, sir. But the message came through on the 'phone, and I received it, in your absence. It was the Home Secretary himself who telephoned—and I don't think it would be wise to question his authority."

There was a grim note in Folkes's voice that made the governor squirm.

"Of course not. That alters the case entirely."

Folkes moved to the door.

"I think it would be advisable to see these gentlemen," he added. "I know Mr. Blake and I have always found him worth while studying. He is one of the few men whose word goes in official circles, sir."

"I will see him at once," the governor declared, following his assistant across the room.

Blake and Blenkers were seated in the comfortable visitors' room when the thickest governor entered. Folkes had left his chief to tackle the situation alone, and there was no outsider present at the interview that took place in that quiet chamber beside the main entrance to the prison.

The governor only gave one short glance at Blake, then his eyes fell on Blenkers, and remained on that long, sallow face. There was a puzzled, confused expression on the governor's face that was not without its humour. This game of Box and Cox had plainly mystified the rather limited intelligence that he possessed.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

He directed his question to Blenkers, but it was Blake who replied.

"There are several things that you can do for us, sir," the great detective said slowly. "But before we mention them there are one or two details that will have to be settled."

He nodded to his companion.

"This is Mr. Blenkers, whom you met once before on the Searach golf-links," he went on. "Unfortunately, that meeting had a

rather heated ending, but I consider that the fault was yours, sir. In any case, it had the effect of making you antagonistic to this gentleman, with rather awkward results for you—and for him."

The governor seated himself in one of the chairs.

"I admit that I—er—rather lost my temper," he stammered.

Blake howed.

"And this afternoon you thought you saw a chance of getting your own back, and you ordered his arrest as an escaped convict."

The governor leaned forward.

"Mr. Blenkers has himself to blame for that," he put in. "There is a man here in this prison who is the dead image of Mr. Blenkers, especially as Mr. Blenkers insists on the prison-crop. I could almost have sworn that it was that man whom I saw on the links, yet I have had proofs that it was not—the man was in here at the time, though he has since made his escape." He gave a helpless wave of the hand.

Blake smiled grimly.

"I agree with you that Mr. Blenkers's appearance might have justified your doubt, and indeed, it is for that reason that we are out to help you in the matter. You admit that the position is an awkward one where you are concerned?"

The governor groaned.

"Deucedly so," he said. "I have only been here about a week, and it looks as though I've made a mess of my appointment already."

Blake's face was very stern.

"I will tell you frankly, sir, that you are not the type of man whom I would appoint to a position of this sort," he said slowly. "To be the governor of a gaol a man requires tact and sympathy, as well as strong discipline. You are inclined to play the hully, and that never pays."

A few hours before the governor would have resented that plain speaking, but he listened to it now in a nervous silence.

"However, Mr. Blenkers and I have nothing to do with the conducting of prisons," Blake went on. "But we both realise that the present position has been brought about to some extent by what we have done, and therefore we are prepared to help you out of it."

"What you—you have done?" the governor gasped.

"Yes."

Blake pointed to Blenkers.

"Does it not strike you as being rather

strange that Mr. Blenkins should be here, considering that, if you had made a mistake, he ought now to be in Scareach police-station?"

The governor jumped to his feet.

"But—but I thought—I thought that you had had him released! Do you mean to say that the fellow I had arrested is—*is* still in the police-station?"

Blake bowed.

"That is just where he is, sir," he said.

The look of amazement in the eyes of the listener made the detective and his companion smile.

"Then who the blazes is he?" the governor gasped.

"He is the man whom your warders are now looking for," said Blake. "But he did not escape this evening—his escape took place at dawn this morning—and Mr. Blenkins here took his place in the convict-gang!"

The bull-necked man wheeled and looked at Blenkins, then dropped back into his seat and ran his hand through his hair.

"I give it up," he said slowly. "If there is any story behind it, let me have it, sir."

There was a story behind it, and Blake told that story, quietly and well. The long, grim ordeal that the brother had gone through, his steady progress, step by step to the great moment when he had changed identities with his unfortunate brother, were unfolded, and the governor listened like a man in a dream.

"Mr. Blenkins is now on the eve of reaping the reward for all that he has endured," Blake ended. "And for him to do so, you will have to help us, sir."

The governor was silent for a moment; then he thrust his chair aside and arose to his feet.

"An extraordinary story," he said. "I don't think I ever heard anything like it before."

It was true that this man had not appeared in a very favourable light. He had proved himself to be a bully and also vindictive; but, despite these facts, he was not altogether impossible, and it seemed that this recital of a patient man's long and grim fight with odds that to most men would have appeared insurmountable, awakened a new feeling.

"I am ready to be of any assistance possible," said the governor of the gaol.

He looked at Blake.

"For instance, I can help you to get a hold of these two rascals, Vanley and the

man Sam," he said. "They have gone back to the cottage that you have mentioned. I happen to know that, because Vanley gave me the address. He was just as puzzled as I was over the dual identities, but I can quite understand why his anxiety was even keener than mine."

Blake and Blenkins looked at each other for a moment; then the detective turned to the governor.

"I will accept your offer," he said. "But there is also another point that I will require assistance on. Where is Sedgill now?"

"He is in the separate ward behind this waiting-room," the governor announced. "We do not ask a man who is going to be released to spend his last night in the cells."

A quick smile crossed Blenkins's face.

"That will do me down to the ground," he said. "Just heave me in along with that fellow, and we'll spend the night together. Work it up to look like the real thing—as though I'd been captured and brought back again. I bet he won't know that I am not Ralph!"

A few minutes served to arrange the plan, and presently into the plainly-furnished room that stood apart from the gatekeeper's house a couple of armed warders stalked, bringing with them the lean, tall American. He was hustled into the room, and the door was banged and locked behind him, and the warders went off down the passage again. Blenkins saw the figure of Sedgill prop itself up on one arm and stare at him from the cot in the corner.

"What the blazes is—hullo! It's you, eh?"

There was an electric-bulb blazing from the ceiling of the room, and beneath it the lean face of the American loomed. Sedgill leaped to his feet and began to dress hurriedly.

"Yes, Sedgill. It is me, all right," Blenkins replied, in a slow, hard voice, as he advanced towards the ferret-eyed rascal.

Sedgill's face revealed something of the fear that was in his heart.

"What did they put you in here for?" he asked. Then he noticed the civilian attire, and his eyes widened.

"I tried to get away, but they were too smart for me, Sedgill," the drawing voice returned. "I wanted mighty badly to get away, for I knew that you were due to leave here to-morrow—and I wanted to meet you—outside."

The coward soul of the man peered out of his eyes. Sedgill, knowing the vile lies he had told, felt that cold fear creep over him

that comes to all wrong-doers when brought face to face with the men they have wronged.

"Well, I ain't going to spend my last night in your company," he said, edging away from the cot. "They'll have to take one of us out of here."

Blenkers was still between his man and the door, and he smiled.

"I guess they won't listen to you, my friend," he returned. "They've been hunting me for hours, and they are all dog-tired. You can shout if you like, but you won't get anyone to listen."

Sedgill slipped to the door and hammered on it, once, twice, then he began to shout. But there was no sign from outside, and presently Blenkers crossed the room and touched him on the arm. Sedgill leaped away, and a snarl came from his lips.

"Keep your hands off me," he shrieked.

His face was twisted into a mask of terror, and it was obvious that his nerves were on end. He had been counting the hours before his release, had been looking forward to meeting his confederates and sharing in that big haul that they had made. And now, at the eleventh hour, here was the victim of that outrageous scheme standing in front of him, tall and grim and menacing.

Blenkers laughed.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm not going to kill you—yet!"

He hesitated over that last word in a way that sent all the blood cold in his listener's veins.

Sedgill backed away against the wall, crouching like a rat about to spring. His face was working with terror, and he made a terrible picture as he watched Blenkers.

"You told a string of lies about me," said Blenkers slowly. "You knew all the time that I had nothing to do with that job. You planned it all very cleverly. I was the scapegoat, and went down for the long stretch, while you and your pal came through with the light one. But I've got something to tell you now that you don't know."

He fixed his hard eyes on Sedgill.

"You think your other friend, Sam, and the master-crook that was behind the game are going to meet you to-morrow, don't you?"

The man beside the wall did not alter his watchful pose.

"Never mind what I think," he snarled.

"You think that Sam is going to take you to the place where he took you that night when you hid the swag—a place that you could not find by yourself, because he took

you there by car, and you do not know the route—you have no idea where it was."

Blenkers saw the furtive eyes widen for a moment. Blake had given the lean American all the story, now, and Blenkers was making full use of it.

"What do you know about it?" Sedgill demanded.

"Only that Sam has tricked you, you fool!" came the grim reply. "For the place he took you to isn't five miles from here, and he's no intention of letting you find it."

"That's a lie, you skunk!" the crook hissed. Blenkers smiled.

"It is the truth," he said. "And I can prove it. I broke out of prison to-night, and saw Sam and Vanley. They didn't see me, but I found out what they were going to do. When you come out to-morrow they are going to take you away somewhere—and put you on the wrong scent. You'll never find that swag—they won't give you the chance. They want it for themselves, and you don't figure in their scheme at all."

Sedgill laughed harshly.

"That is what you say," he returned. "But I'm not worrying. If they try to do the dirty on me—well, let 'em. But I'll bet they never find the stuff without me helping them."

His ferret eyes cast a swift glance at Blenkers.

"If you are trying to bluff me, you can count it out," he went on. "I am not such a fool as to swallow all the stuff that you hand over."

He drew himself erect.

"If you are so darned sure that the place Sam took me to is not five miles from here maybe you can describe it?" he sneered.

Sedgill had every right to think that his sneering challenge was a poser. So far as he was aware, the place that he had hidden the swag was miles away—in another part of the country altogether. Sam had deliberately hoodwinked his confederate in that respect—and that breach of faith was to bear fruit now.

"I will describe it," said Blenkers slowly. "It is a tumbledown farm, with a row of barns and cowsheds behind it. In the farmyard there is a duckpond, and an underground passage leads from the duckpond into a brook." He saw the dawning amazement on the rascal's face, and came to a halt.

"I see you know all about that duckpond and passage," he added grimly.

Sedgill's lean fists clenched.

"Somebody told you all that," he said, at last. "You couldn't know—you were never there—"

"I was there not two hours ago," Blenkers said drily. "I can even give you the name of the place—Discombe Farm."

Again Sedgill's eyes betrayed the thoughts of their owner. Sedgill knew the name, but during the long three years that he had spent in the gaol it had never occurred to him to ask if there was a farm of that name in the vicinity. Nor is that surprising when it is remembered what that farm meant to him.

Blenkers crossed to the cot and seated himself.

"Call it a bluff if you like," he said slowly. "But I can tell you that you'll never benefit by your scheme. Sam and Vanley will see to that. They mean to get you right out of the way—to bluff you by taking you to another place altogether. They have been here for months now, trying to find the swag, and they don't want you to share in it."

Sedgill laughed grimly.

"I don't see where you come in on this," he said. "But I can tell you that they can look for a year and they won't find it without I help them. And if they are trying to double-cross me—then, by James, they'll never find it."

When a man has spent three years in gaol, looking forward to the hour when his release will give him the chance of enjoying ill-gotten gains, that man is likely to develop into a vindictive animal if he finds that he has been betrayed.

"I don't come in at all—except to be satisfied that you are likely to be double-crossed just as you double-crossed me," said Blenkers. "If you don't believe me, there's an easy way to prove it."

"How?"

Blenkers nodded at the locked door.

"They let you out to-morrow," he said. "Just ask the first man you meet where Discombe Farm is! You'll find then that I am right, and you can go to the farm and make sure of getting there before Sam and Vanley can get at you and bluff you. That's all I've got to say to you."

He turned round on the cot then, and settled himself as though to sleep. Sedgill asked him one or two questions, but receiving no replies, went over to another cot and stretched himself out on it, muttering to himself.

An hour later two warders came into the

room, and Blenkers was marched off between them—back to his own cell, Sedgill thought.

But in that surmise the rogue was very much mistaken. It is true that the warders had handcuffed Blenkers when he passed out of the room with them, but these handcuffs were removed as soon as they were out in the wide prison-yard, and Blenkers was directed across to the quarters of the governor, where another warder piloted him into a well-lighted office—and there, between two grim-jawed officers, stood the two rogues, Vanley and Sam!

The governor was seated at his desk, and Sexton Blake stood by his side. Vanley swung round and looked at the tall figure of Blenkers as the American came up to the desk. There was no mistaking the light of rage and dismay that came into the master-crook's eyes.

"Mr. Blake has brought about the arrest of these two men," the governor said, in a stiff, official voice. "He charges them with complicity in a certain crime, the Gorrings Museum robbery. I understand that you can also give evidence against these two men, Mr. Blenkers?"

Vanley leaned forward. His hard eyes were fixed on Blenkers's face, and suddenly they lighted up.

"This is not the man who was arrested on the links this morning," he cried suddenly. "I thought at the time there was a slight difference—the colour of the eyes—"

He swung round and faced the governor.

"It is a conspiracy," he went on. "This cursed detective is working up a dud charge against me in order to get the coast clear. There is someone here in this prison that they are after, and, by James, I think I know who it is."

His criminal brain was putting him on the right lines at last—but it was too late then. Vanley had not seen Ralph Blenkers for three years, had never seen him in convict crop and convict garb, and it was only now that the startling resemblance between the two brothers was beginning to dawn on him.

Had he found out that fact a short week before he might have made use of it, but now it was beyond his cunning to slip out of the net.

But, for reasons of his own, the governor preserved an appearance of impartiality.

"If you have any statements to make you can do so to-morrow," he said. "In the meanwhile I must accept Mr. Blake's statements. You will both, therefore, remain

here in custody until you can be taken to Seareach to-morrow."

Vanley broke into another storm of protest, but it availed him nothing. The governor played the part of "polite but firm" gaoler to perfection.

"I will make you as comfortable as possible," he said. "After all, it is only a few hours, and you can always have redress if the charge against you should prove to be false."

He touched a bell, and Chief Warder Stone appeared.

"You will take charge of these two individuals, Stone," the governor commanded. "See that they do not escape."

To Vanley that grim command was like the voice of doom. His long career of crime was about to suffer an eclipse, and suddenly, with an angry oath, he leaped forward and tried to close with Blake.

But Blenkers had been watching the evil rascal with unwavering eyes, and that sudden attack was a signal that the lean man had been looking for—a chance that he had never had until then.

The law, of course, would deal with Vanley in its good time, but to Blenkers nothing in the world would make up for that three years of agony that he and his brother Ralph had suffered. Vanley might be imprisoned and punished, but no human power could give back to these two brothers the three wasted years of youth.

It was that thought that sent the lean man leaping forward like a cat, and put an extra power into the long arm and bunched fist that shot out.

Vanley, his strong fingers hooked, was just clutching at Blake's throat when Blenkers's fist went home. It caught Vanley clean on the point of the jaw—just where it was meant to go.

It was a terrific blow, with all a strong man's pent-up anger behind it. Vanley was lifted clean off his feet and fell sprawling across the governor's desk, making the thickest governor leap out of his chair.

When the warders grabbed at Vanley again and drew him to the floor, they had no need to do more than glance at the limp, gasping body.

Sam was hustled out of the room, and Stone and another warder carted the dazed Vanley away with them, grinning quietly to each other.

When they had vanished down the corridor the governor arose to his feet, and with a rather sheepish smile nodded to Blenkers.

"You know how to deliver a punch, Mr. Blenkers," he said. "That one came in very opportunely."

Blenkers held out his hand.

"I guess that there is just one punch that I feel sort of sorry I ever delivered," he said. "I wonder if you would shake and forget it?"

And, to his credit be it said, the governor of the prison was man enough to take that proffered palm, and so settle the foolish little incident that his own anger and bullying ways had brought about.

While the above incidents were taking place, Tinker and I had hurried down to Discombe Farm, and were making ourselves comfortable there. We saw that the line of warders had been removed and the great searchlight no longer blinked and glared across the dark expanse of moor. Blake had told us what to expect, and so just about dawn I reached out and awakened the young 'un, who had fallen sound asleep leaning over the kitchen table.

"We will have to be making a move now, Tinker," I said. "It is getting close to the time, and we don't want to take any risks."

He gave a yawn wide enough to take the top of his head off.

"There is a bit too much energy needed in this sort of game," he said. "I feel as though I hadn't slept for a week. The only fellow who really comes out best from this week-end of ours is your man Sam!"

I laughed.

"It certainly has been just about the warmest week-end holiday that I have ever tackled," I agreed.

Presently we were out in the farmyard, and we crossed to an old tree that was growing beside the road and climbed into it. Blake had told us what he hoped to do. He meant to try and get Sedgill to go to the farm alone, and Tinker and I were to watch his movements when he got there.

"Do you know Sedgill?" I asked.

Tinker was making himself very comfortable along one guarded bough.

"Can't say that I do," he returned.

"Neither of us have seen the beggar, so it would look rather stupid if it was the wrong man that came here."

Tinker grinned.

"That was why Blenkers wanted to get his brother out of gaol," he said slowly. "He was the only one who would be able to recognise Sedgill at a glance. Between our-

selves, old Biekers did not forget much when he carried out these plans of his."

"He had every reason to make him careful," I pointed out.

We sat still for a few minutes, watching the dawn slowly spreading across the dark moors. I thought of what had happened on the previous day, and noted again the wreathing mist as it moved down the road.

"If Sedgill comes along here we will have to keep a sharp look-out on him—or the beggar may trick us after all," I said.

"It is this blinking mist," Tinker returned. "It would be quite easy for someone to dodge in under it and lose themselves."

Another half an hour passed, and then at last I caught sight of a figure moving down the road.

"Look out, Tinker," I murmured.

I heard the young 'un move so that the branch jiggled a little.

"I've twigged him," Tinker said. "I think it is Sedgill. I got the warder to describe him—and that is about the same sort of figure and general appearance."

It was a middle-sized, lean shape that came out through the mists and climbed the gate that formed a barrier between the road and the farm.

Tinker and I did not move, but watched the figure below in silence.

It was Sedgill right enough, and at first his actions rather perplexed me. He seemed to be moving about like a man in a haze, first to the barn, then back again to the house, halting every now and then to look around.

Fortunately for us the tree that we were concealed in gave us a good view of the whole line of buildings as well as the farm, and so we could follow the movements of the released rascal easily enough.

Finally Sedgill managed to get into the back yard, and halted just in front of the duck-pond. We saw him look about for a long moment, then a change came over his attitude. It suddenly became very alert and eager, and he hurried across to the tumble-down gate and looked up and down the lane for a moment as though afraid that he was being followed. But there was no one about at that hour of the morning, and at last Sedgill went back to the duck-pond, then moving off round it he cleared the low wall and began to head across the cattle-yard on the right.

"Tinker, this is where we have either to get busy, or lose that rascal," I suggested.

"That's what I think," said Tinker.

He swung round on his branch, and like the young monkey that he was, commenced to swing from branch to branch down to the ground, dropping on all fours. I followed his example, and we reached the ground almost together, then we rushed across the old farmyard and gained the wall over which Sedgill had disappeared.

The mist was clearing slightly, and we could see that the sun would be out in another few moments.

"But where the blazes is Sedgill?" Tinker muttered, peering across the space.

At one time or another that had been used as a paddock, and there were a few posts erected in the centre, and close to them was a tumbledown well.

I could not see any signs of Sedgill, then suddenly I noticed that the rope that was wound round the drum of the winch above the well seemed to be moving much more than was necessary.

"I think he is down there," I whispered, pointing to the swaying rope. "And I should not be surprised if that is the hiding-place where the booty has lain all these years."

In a moment Tinker was over the wall, and I joined him. We crept across and reached the well. A low wall of bricks, about two feet high, guarded the mouth of the well, and the winch stood over it with the rope falling straight down into the well.

Tinker wriggled himself forward until he could see over the edge of the well, and I followed his example.

Sedgill was standing on a narrow ledge about six feet below the top of the well, and he was working the rope to and fro now, dropping it, then raising it again, as though he were fishing for something. So engrossed was he in his task that he did not even see us. His back was towards us, and we lay there very still, watching his operations.

Again and again he made his cast, and we could hear the metallic clank of the hook on the end of the rope as it thudded against the side of the well.

I could not hear any sound of water, and it dawned on me then that the well had probably run dry, which we proved afterwards to be the case.

At last Sedgill's long fishing produced the expected result. The rope suddenly tautened, and we heard him give a grim chuckle of satisfaction, then he began to draw in the

rope hand over hand, and at last out of the well there rose a rusted, battered bucket. It was hooked to the rope by the metal hook, which had caught in the handle, and from the pull of the rope it was obvious that that bucket weighed something considerable.

"Look out, young 'un!" I murmured. "He will be coming up here now."

There was no place for us to hide when if we had wanted to do so. But before we could make a move, a rather humorous thing happened. Sedgill, having rescued the bucket, knew well enough that he could not climb out of the well with the bucket in his hands, so he gave a quick heave to the rusted thing and it came flying up over the low wall, and landed within an inch of Tinker's head!

Quick as a flash Tinker grabbed at the bucket, and at that same moment Sedgill came sprawling out over the low wall of the well. He saw us, and into his face there leaped a look of rage and fear. Then suddenly, with a snarling oath, he flung himself on Tinker and tried to wrest the bucket out of the young 'un's hands.

"That belongs to me! Hands off! Do you hear?" Sedgill yelled.

Tinker was on his feet now, and he clung to that bucket like a leech.

Sedgill had taken hold of one end of the handle, while Tinker was grabbing the other, and they tugged and strained and circled round and round like a pair of terriers quarrelling over a bone, until the bucket, which was a very old and crazy affair, gave up the struggle.

It split in half, and Sedgill went sprawling one way, while Tinker did a similar stunt on the other side. But I hardly saw what happened to them. I was much too interested in that bucket, for as it split in two there was a parcel inside it that also burst its sides, and out from that parcel fell a stream of jewels, cameos, and pearls!

The Gorringe Museum swag lay in a shimmering heap on the dew-spangled grass in front of the well.

I admit that I was very slow. I simply stood still, staring at the glistening heap, and next thing I knew was Sedgill on his feet, and making a wild rush at me.

I let him have one as he came, but he barged into me and I went down on the turf with a thud, and next moment Sedgill was streaking across that paddock like the wind. Tinker leaped up and followed him,

and I gathered myself together and watched the chase.

I think that Sedgill would have got away—even Tinker admits that—but just as the released convict reached the wall and made to leap over it, a long, lanky figure shot up from behind it and shot out its arms, so that Sedgill, already in mid-air, found himself clasped round the waist in a bearlike hug, then both men went sprawling behind the wall, locked in a grim clinch.

It was Mr. Blenkers, and from the farmyard there came a shout, and presently Sexton Blake appeared beyond the wall. I did not see the dust-up that took place then, but I guessed that Sedgill's goose was fairly cooked—and so it was!

A few minutes later, while I was busy trying to gather up that heap of jewels Blake and Tinker and Blenkers came across to me, and I saw behind them the figure of the Chief-warder Stone, and by his side was Sedgill, in handcuffs.

"Picking daisies, Lawless?" Blake said, with a smile.

I fished out a rather beautiful amethyst and held it up.

"I wish that every field held daisies like this," I returned.

We all set to work then and searched every inch of the ground around the well, for the parcel had split and a shower of smaller jewels had shot all over the place. But we managed to find the whole lot at last, and it was Blenkers who gave the final touch to the grim scene.

"We will want something to carry these things in, I guess," he said. "And we'll use that valise of mine that is hidden in the coppice."

And so the valise was duly found, and its convict-kit, that had been left in it by Ralph, was thrown out, to make place for the jewels—the very jewels through which the younger Blenkers had been forced to wear that drab garb.

"Where are we going to now?" I asked.

Blenkers looked at Blake.

"Seareach," he said. "There is a man in the police-station there that I want to see—want to see very badly, so that I may tell him that he will never be a gaolbird again."

Then his keen eyes went moist, and he held out his hands to us.

"I would never have managed it but for you gentlemen," he breathed. "I guess I've given you a heap of trouble, and you must

have thought all sorts of things about me. But you will admit now that I had to do what I did?"

Tinker grinned.

"Yes, you had to do what you did; but it wanted a lot of studying out, Mr. Blenkers," he returned. "And you cannot blame us for being a little bit doubtful about you at the start."

Blenkers took off his cap, revealing his prison-crop.

"How could anyone be anything else but doubtful when a man walks about like a branded rogue?" he said.

And it was only then that I realised how, deep down in his heart, Blenkers had loathed and hated the disfiguring crop that he had endured for so long.

"Do you know the thing I am going to do after I have seen Ralph?" he said slowly.

Tinker chuckled.

"Have a shave," he suggested; and Blenkers smiled.

"Hit it first time, young 'un," he said, fingering his stubble-covered chin. "I'm out for a shave—and a bottle of hair-tonic."

And on that half-humorous note I think I can end the yarn.

Vanley and Sam and Sedgill were hauled up for conspiracy, and they all received

smart sentences. The jewels were returned to the Gorrings Museum, and the insurance company obtained a return of their money. But Blenkers and his brother Ralph did not wait to see the end of the case.

They went back to America, and it was Blake himself who worked matters so that the grim secret in their lives might not be revealed on the other side.

"Ralph has lost three years of his life, and nothing can make up to him for that," he pointed out. "But at least we can see to it that the truth never follows him to his home. His friends and relations need never know that he was ever inside an English prison; and the kindest thing we can do for him is to prevent them from ever finding that out."

That is why we have used fictitious names right through, for although the case was certainly well worth recording, we did not want anyone to be able to identify Blenkers through it.

Besides, he no longer indulges in the gaol-hird crop now, and even if you were to meet him you would never recognise him as the hero of our extraordinary week-end at golf—as Tinker sagely remarks.

THE END.



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